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Republic of Congo.
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How to support state- building, service delivery and recovery in fragile and conflict- affected situations

Lessons from six years
of SLRC research

SLRC policy briefings present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on issues relating to livelihoods, basic services and social protection in conflict-affected situations. This and other SLRC Briefing Papers are available from www.securelivelihoods.org. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, Irish Aid and the EC.

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Since 2011, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has sought to understand how processes of post-conflict recovery and state-building play out in some of the world's most challenging contexts – and to equip policy-makers and practitioners with better information on how to support these processes.

Over the past six years, we have learned that state-building and recovery are turbulent processes – and supporting them requires more than technical 'best-practice' fixes. Policy and programming need to become more adept at navigating politics, building relationships, and responding to ever-changing situations.

This overarching message is underpinned by five key findings from SLRC's broad programme of mixed-methods research:

- 1 Livelihood recovery is neither automatic nor linear after conflict.** Vulnerability to shocks and stresses – including those not related to conflict – persists long after wars end, sometimes causing the rapid depletion of hard-won livelihood improvements.
- 2 It is the 'how' that matters when it comes to the question of whether service delivery can enhance state legitimacy.** Improvements in physical access and overall perceived quality matter far less than how people are treated, including whether they are engaged by providers and have access to channels of redress.
- 3 Grievances, unfairness and exclusion – both within arenas of service delivery and the workplace – are enduring issues and must be taken seriously.** Experiencing problems with services can lead to negative perceptions of government. Exploitation in the labour market has far-reaching negative consequences for people's livelihoods and perceptions.
- 4 State-building is fundamentally about how individuals and organisations relate to each other.** This is true in relation to both legitimacy (where the nature of interactions between state and society heavily shape prospects for legitimation) and capacity (where a state's performance is underpinned by the kinds of relationships it has with other stakeholders).
- 5 Supporting state-building, service delivery and recovery means engaging with power and politics beyond government alone.** These processes are both formally and informally regulated by a wide range of actors and institutions. It is therefore essential that power analysis be multidimensional.

In the last decade, a substantial volume of the aid distributed in fragile and conflict-affected situations has gone to providing basic services such as health, education

**Life under conflict is not static.
Recovery is not automatic.
War-to-peace transitions do not
follow simple, even trajectories.**

**The key message for policy-makers
coming out of SLRC's research is
that programming in fragile and
conflict-affected situations needs to
become more adept at handling the
turbulence of conflict, state-building
and recovery.**

and water. The common assumption is that providing services enhances the legitimacy of the state, strengthens relationships between citizens and governments, and ultimately reduces the risk of sliding back into conflict. Investing in basic services, and a state's capacity to deliver them, is thereby seen to generate a win-win outcome: improved human capital and positive spill-over effects on governance.

Six years ago, when SLRC was established, we set out to generate evidence in a range of fragile and conflict-affected situations about whether delivering services could contribute to state-building in these ways. Alongside other questions – notably about how people maintain their livelihoods during conflict and recover them afterwards – we carried out research in eight countries characterised by varying degrees of conflict and fragility: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

At the heart of SLRC's research is a longitudinal panel survey across five countries – in which more than 8,000 people were interviewed in 2012 and again in 2015 – that has allowed us to directly track changes over time in how people make a living, access basic services and engage with the state (Sturge *et al.*, 2017). Alongside this, qualitative work has allowed us to not only decipher *what* has happened, but to understand *why*.

So what have we learnt? What do six years of research on state-building, service delivery and recovery tell us about how to more effectively support these processes?

There is an idea that once conflict formally ends, better service delivery follows, state legitimacy returns, and livelihoods naturally recover. SLRC's evidence does not support this idea.

Our findings raise big questions over the supposed 'peace dividend' that is meant to accompany the end of war. Things do not automatically get better for all: recovery is choppy, uneven and turbulent. New forms of thinking and action are required that can handle this difficult reality.

This short policy brief highlights five overarching findings from six years of SLRC research, and puts forward concrete ideas for more attuned policy and programming.

1 After conflict, livelihood recovery is neither automatic nor linear

The SLRC panel survey (Sturge *et al.*, 2017) has measured household food security at two points in time – firstly in 2012¹ and again in 2015 – as one indicator of livelihoods and wellbeing. On average, food security changed little over this period for the sampled populations as a whole. But these averages conceal a more complicated reality: there is little

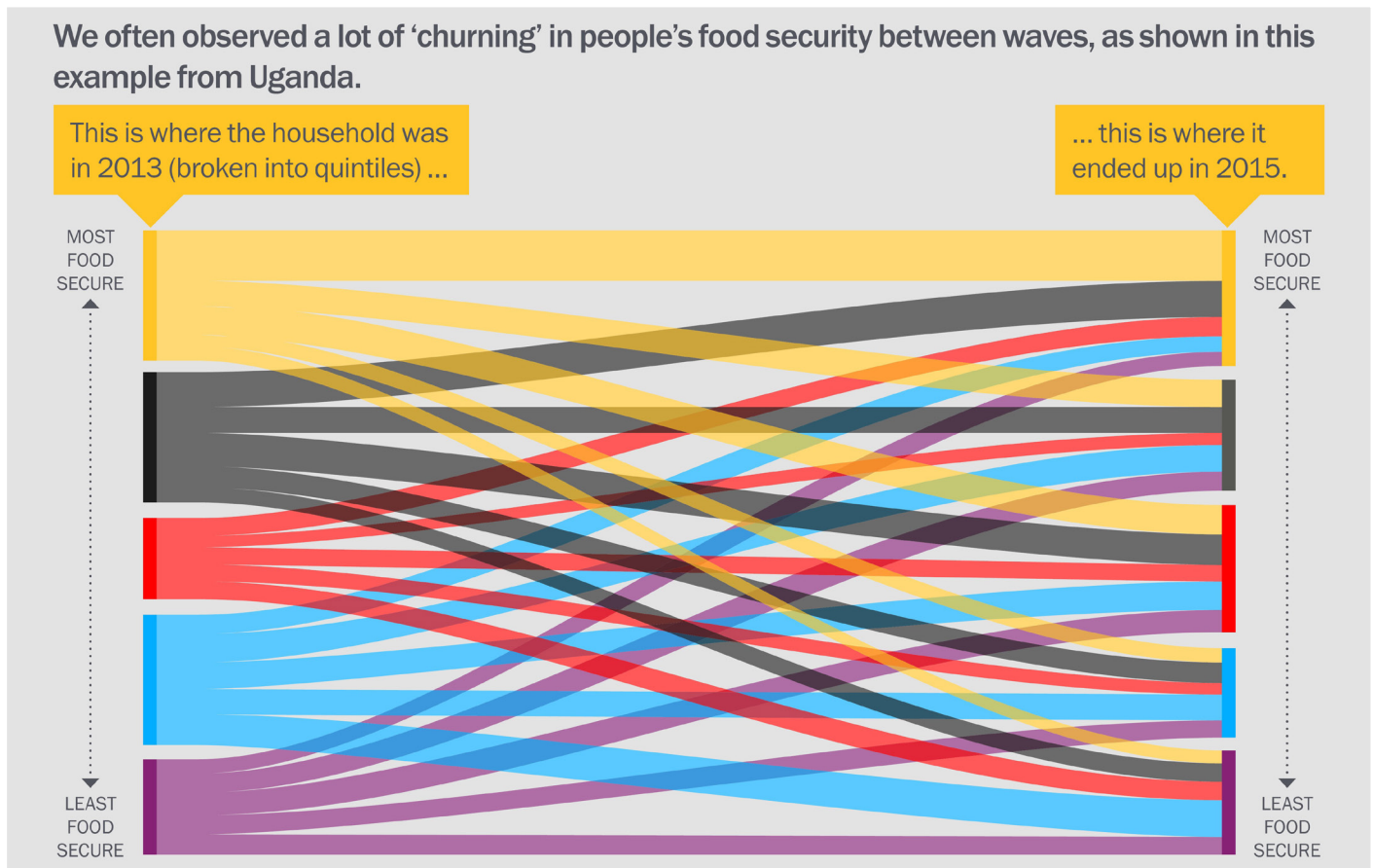
about food security – or people's lives and wellbeing more broadly – that is static.

The real story is one of fluctuation, turbulence and volatility in people's fortunes. Tracking each respondent individually using panel data analysis demonstrates that more than 90% of households experienced some change in food security over time.

What is startling about these changes is the sheer amount of 'churning' – meaning that while some households have seen improvements in food security, at the same time relatively equal numbers have seen theirs worsen. Also remarkable is the extent to which households can move rapidly from top to bottom of a food-security distribution – and vice versa (Figure 1).

Improvements and declines in households' livelihood status can occur rapidly, which cannot be explained by conflict and insecurity alone.

Figure 1: Changes in food security in Uganda



1 In Uganda the baseline was in 2013.

Conflict and insecurity alone do not explain the churn. Instead, we find that unstable and volatile trajectories of change are strongly associated with the shocks and stresses that households continue to face, often in the aftermath of war. In four out of five survey countries (Pakistan is the exception), an increase in the number of shocks – especially health and environmental shocks – or in the number of crimes experienced between waves is associated with worsening food security.

But it is not just about these ‘objective’, tangible experiences: people’s perceptions of safety also matter. There is strong evidence that an improvement in a respondent’s perception of safety in their local area is associated with an improvement in their food security too.

In part, the churning may also reflect the complex relationship between conflict, security and economic preferences (including investment). Households in many countries show increasing ownership levels of bulky, non-portable assets. As one example, in DRC the share of households owning tables and chairs increased from 58% to 76%, and beds from 70% to 90% (Ferb *et al.*, 2016). Another cluster of assets that increased substantially in all countries was electronic goods, including televisions, fans and air-conditioning units (plus solar panels in Uganda).

In some cases, the rise in bulky asset ownership corresponds with a reduction in physical fighting in households’ surrounding areas. In Pakistan, for example, while 99% of households reported fighting in their area between 2009 and 2012, that share fell to 4% for the period between 2012 and 2015 (Shahbaz *et al.*, 2017). But, somewhat counterintuitively, asset accumulation is *not* associated with improved perceptions of local safety. Neither do these perceptions neatly square with improvements in physical security: even where respondents report less fighting on the whole, there is no guarantee that they correspondingly *feel* safer.

Our findings about flux and churning are not restricted to food security and assets. For example, we found similar patterns of fluctuation in people’s access to services and their perceptions of government. Nor are these findings based exclusively on SLRC’s panel survey data. Our qualitative work on livelihoods (Maxwell *et al.*, 2017) reflects many of the quantitative findings, highlighting how post-conflict trajectories are rarely simple or linear – even where violent conflict clearly ends. In most of the countries where SLRC has worked, legacies of conflict – such as limited access to land, physical and mental disability, and exclusion of returnees – combine with other shocks and slow down recovery.

The qualitative research also tells us that, amidst all this turbulence, some things endure. There is evidence that horizontal inequalities – in relation to gender, religion,

ethnicity, caste and geography – persist, even in volatile situations. While churning gives the impression of ‘choppy seas’, with people constantly being pushed back and forth in different directions, there are still strong currents beneath the surface. In SLRC’s second phase, we will focus on better understanding what these deeper currents mean for both churning and prospects for recovery.

Policy implications

Assume a long and non-linear trajectory for the recovery of livelihoods and wellbeing. Timelines and trajectories in conflict and post-conflict settings are far more complex than often assumed. Household fortunes can change dramatically even within a relatively short time. The extent to which households appear able to stay on upward trajectories of livelihood recovery relates to the diverse shocks and stresses that households in conflict-affected situations face. This requires us to pay more attention to shocks – not just those related to conflict, but health and environmental shocks too – and to think in terms of decades rather than years for programmes to achieve lasting impact.

Turbulent livelihoods reinforce the need to avoid blueprint, ‘best-practice’ programming and pay closer attention to context. To be able to support livelihood recovery in conflict-affected situations, there is a need for analysis of how people make a living, the constraints and shocks they face in doing so, and the opportunities on offer. These factors and characteristics are often highly context-specific, resulting in great variation between different places. Furthermore, this tends to occur at a highly granular level – i.e. not just between different districts, but between different villages and towns within those districts. There is thus a need for localised responses, rather than grand, blueprint approaches to recovery and state-building in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Think carefully about how – and whether – to target support. Churning in people’s livelihood and wellbeing status suggests we need to be careful about trying to find ever more complex criteria to identify vulnerable households. In many cases, it would be better to find simple targeting methods that are locally understood and perceived as fair. In others, there could be credible arguments for providing blanket support.

2 Service delivery and state legitimacy: it’s the ‘how’ that matters

SLRC finds very little evidence to support the claim that delivering services enhances state legitimacy by improving people’s perceptions of government. This is most apparent when we consider physical access to services, referring to the time it takes people to reach facilities. Here, there is zero evidence from the panel survey that improvements in people’s physical access to services influences their perceptions of government.



Conducting an interview in Afghanistan.

Likewise, when people's satisfaction with services improves, there is no consistent relationship with improved perceptions across countries or sectors. For example, satisfaction with health services appears to make a difference to perceptions in DRC, but not consistently elsewhere.

We also find no evidence to support the idea that when services are delivered by non-government providers – such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, and the private sector – government actors lose legitimacy. This raises big questions about the strongly held view that an ongoing presence of non-government service providers after conflict undermines state-building and legitimisation processes.

All this is not to say that service delivery doesn't matter at all for how people think about government. In fact, what the findings suggest is that it is *how* one delivers services that really counts.

People routinely have more positive views of government actors when service delivery is backed up by grievance and accountability mechanisms, when people are included in decision-making, and when they are kept informed about what is happening.

However, when people start experiencing problems with their service provision, perceptions of government deteriorate. This reflects a more widespread finding that legitimisation is a precarious, long-term process that can be easily undone: as our DRC survey team note, 'trust arrives by foot but disappears on horseback' (Ferf *et al.*, 2016).

Bringing in the qualitative findings, SLRC's evidence provides insights into how to think more appropriately about legitimacy and its relationship with service delivery in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Our research highlights the importance of understanding 'legitimising narratives' and how they vary – over time, by location, and by social group. Indeed, legitimisation is driven not by a uniform set of normative characteristics or functions, but by factors that are ultimately contextual. The provision of services and social transfers, or even of particular types of services and transfers, sometimes come into these legitimising narratives, but this is not always the case.

There's a strong received wisdom that delivering services enhances state legitimacy by improving people's perceptions of government. SLRC's evidence suggests this is true in some ways, but not in others.

Policy implications

SLRC's research suggests that investments in delivering basic services might be refocused in several ways:

Recognise that achieving state legitimacy is only a secondary (or even tertiary) objective of service delivery. State-building strategies that place a heavy emphasis on services as a route to improved perceptions of government, and potentially increased political legitimacy, can be overly simplistic.

Prioritise service delivery for its own sake. Regardless of whether it generates legitimacy, better service delivery is important in its own right because of the role it plays in ensuring basic wellbeing and developing human capital.

Do not assume that non-government provision undermines state legitimacy. From a legitimisation perspective, SLRC's evidence suggests that governments do not necessarily have to be at the frontline of delivery. In the contexts under study, the presence of other providers does not seem to drastically influence the way people think about government. This evidence frees up policy-makers to think differently about the various roles that governments might play beyond direct delivery, such as providing stewardship and coordinating action.

Take a 'do no harm' approach to service-delivery programming. Service delivery is often framed as a route to state legitimisation, but the evidence suggests the opposite

can also be true: service delivery done poorly is capable of worsening people's perceptions of government. Applying 'do no harm' principles to programming in this area may help to mitigate the potential delegitimising effects of bad service delivery – especially that which is viewed as unfair or which exacerbates existing inequalities.

Pay more attention to the quality of services, including strong systems for ensuring accountability. The ways in which services are delivered (for example, whether patients are treated with dignity and respect by clinic staff) require as much attention as do output metrics (for example the number of schools or clinics built, or boreholes dug, or school attendance or quantities of drugs dispensed at a clinic). Getting this right will require, in turn:

- **A greater focus on how programmes work at the very local level.** This requires balancing micro-level specificity with scale and national coverage. As a starting point, more could be done to strengthen reporting systems and feedback loops, so that local problems, concerns and grievances are heard by decision-makers and those in power.
- **Prioritising political and historical analysis of the local sources of legitimacy.** Understanding local institutions and power relations is a pre-requisite for establishing whether service delivery is likely to carry any real degree of legitimising potential in a given setting.

3 Taking grievances, unfairness and exclusion more seriously

Not all good things go together. Even as countries progress through war-to-peace transitions, aspects of exclusion and unfairness remain apparent. From a peace-building perspective, this ought to be of major concern to policy-makers.

We see this theme play out across several areas of SLRC's research. In relation to service delivery and legitimacy, SLRC's qualitative research shows that perceptions of unfairness and exclusion have a strong influence on people's perception of government, and may result in grievances against the state.

- **In South Sudan's Jonglei State,** Lou Nuer and Murle populations held perceptions of government that were influenced both positively (sympathy for the recent formation and perceived lack of resources for government) and negatively (the perception that they had been marginalised by what they saw as a Dinka-dominated state and national government) (Maxwell *et al.*, 2014).
- **In Pakistan,** respondents in Lower Dir and Swat districts identified a strong perception of politicisation or favouritism in the delivery of social protection and livelihoods assistance (Shahbaz *et al.*, 2017). A similar theme was also observed in northern Uganda.

Credit: Richard Mallett, 2014.



Service delivery: unloading food aid, Sierra Leone.

■ **In Nepal**, the early accession of Dalits to social protection, through targeting a marginalised group, appears to have had an alienating effect on members of other caste groups (KC *et al.*, 2014).

■ **In Sri Lanka**, there were strong perceptions among interviewees in the north that the continuation of patronage politics made it both harder for some and easier for others to receive services, regardless of formal eligibility criteria. Furthermore, raising grievances about access to services was seen by many women as either futile or potentially damaging to their prospects of accessing services in the future (Mayadunne and Phillips, 2016).

Unfairness and exclusion are also economic issues. Post-conflict economies are supposed to benefit from a peace dividend, and growth rates are often strong in the years following war.

But this growth can be remarkably jobless. It is often characterised by the concentration of opportunity among a select few – a reflection of the fact that access to economic opportunities is intensely governed by a range of formal and informal regulations – while an outcast majority finds itself in poorly paid, exploitative and precarious forms of work. SLRC’s research from Sri Lanka (Jayasekar and Najab, 2016) and Uganda (Mallett *et al.*, 2017) are perhaps the best illustrations of this.

As a result, labour markets become sites not where peace dividends are manifested, but where various forms of poverty and violence are maintained and, subsequently, where grievances emerge.

While much of the urgency around economic development in conflict-affected situations stems from the concern that unemployed youth may be drawn into armed violence in the absence of jobs, SLRC’s evidence on markets suggests a different emphasis (Mallett and Pain, 2017). It is not necessarily a lack of employment that is most likely to lead to the expression of grievances, but rather the way in which people are incorporated into markets on adverse terms.

This issue of large numbers of ‘working poor’ is arguably the central policy challenge here.

Policy implications

Avoid the carelessly-applied notion of post-conflict settings as a relatively ‘blank slate’, in which old grievances have evaporated and any new service is bound to be viewed positively. SLRC’s evidence demonstrates how legacies of conflict continue to shape people’s access to services (or their exclusion from them), and donors must bear these in mind in their programming. At the same time, the nature of political settlements prior to, and arising after, conflict also shapes people’s narratives and expectations about the state and the role of services within it, as well as their perceptions of fairness regarding the distribution of services. Ignoring these perceptions and expectations will undermine attempts to build stability.

Achieving fairness and addressing grievances associated with jobs and markets requires a response beyond the usual toolbox of skills training, access to credit and infrastructure investments. Markets in our focus countries are regulated through informal means that are beyond the reach of the state and difficult to decipher. These tend to be overlooked by policies and approaches such as the World Bank’s *Doing Business* initiative², but require careful analysis and treatment. Efforts to strengthen formal labour laws and regulations, and to increase the bargaining power of labour organisations, will help to tackle adverse incorporation of vulnerable workers. So too will more politically informed and savvy ways of working, which could be used to enhance not just the *quantity* but the *quality* of work available to conflict-affected societies.

4 State-building is fundamentally about relationships and connections

SLRC has looked at two dimensions of state-building: i) processes of *legitimation*, and the factors associated with this; and ii) what external actors can do to strengthen the *capacity* of states to deliver services. One finding comes out strongly across both dimensions, namely that state-building is ultimately a question of relationships and connections.

What does this mean? Let’s start with legitimacy. We often think that a ‘legitimate state’ is one that performs well against a normative, standardised set of metrics. Is it providing public services, delivering economic opportunities, ensuring national security? Fulfilling core functions such as these is usually considered necessary for legitimacy to occur.

SLRC’s research suggests the reality is more complicated (Nixon and Mallett, 2017). It is not simply about whether a government is providing these core functions, but whether its performance and decisions are ‘in line’ with the narratives,

2 <http://www.doingbusiness.org/>

norms and expectations of those granting legitimacy: citizens. Are its actions perceived as fair? Are they morally acceptable within society? Are the interests and priorities of people being met? These are the more important questions to ask.

The underlying message is that legitimacy is best understood as a *relational quality* rather than an objectively, externally defined characteristic of a given authority. It ultimately comes down to the way government (and its actions) are judged by citizens. And those judgements are, in turn, heavily dependent on history, politics and public expectations.

What is 'legitimizing' in one place and at one time can thus be quite different from in other contexts. It can also be quite different from one social group to the next. When we look more closely at the evidence on grievance mechanisms, for example, we see from the qualitative research that people's experiences with them – and the nature of their interactions with the state – are mediated by a range of identity-based factors, such as caste and gender.

We often talk in terms of the social contract, which in its simplest sense refers to the things a state must provide to citizens in order for them to accept its authority and comply with its rule. But the point here is that there is no single social contract within a particular society – there are multiple kinds. The specific nature of the social contract will be determined by historical relationships between the state and different groups of society.

As one example, government actors in Sri Lanka are challenged by minority Muslims because they are seen as lacking consistency, predictability, fairness and trust. For other ethnic groups, however, government performance is perceived as being much more in line with their expectations and beliefs (Sanguhan and Gunasekara, 2017).

These historical characteristics filter people's experience of service delivery, and affect the degree to which government performance results in a legitimization effect. Without an understanding of these varying relationships between the state and different social groups, it is not possible to predict such effects.

Turning to the question of state capacity for service delivery – and how that might be strengthened via external support – SLRC's work on capacity development draws similar conclusions (Denney *et al.*, 2017). We find that, despite the wide range of possible capacity-support activities on offer, programming tends to favour the tangible and quantifiable approaches of training and resource supply. With this overwhelmingly technical approach comes an assumption that building state capacity is a modular exercise – that putting the pieces or 'building blocks' in place is enough.

In South Sudan, we found that numerous schools, clinic facilities and boreholes were constructed, but saw no realistic plan for government institutions to take responsibility for

their sustained operation (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, in Nepal, there was limited long-term support to underpin investments in water infrastructure, so big dams and pipelines went without regular maintenance (Acharya *et al.*, 2016).

Essentially, in focusing on the building blocks, not enough attention gets paid to the glue – i.e. systems – that holds the components of service delivery together.

Furthermore, we find that even where progress is made to strengthen the 'systemic hardware' – i.e. the rules, procedures, procurement chains, reporting mechanisms, supply systems – what we can think of as the 'systemic software' often goes ignored. By this we mean the less visible and intangible aspects of systemic capacity: factors bound up within social and political relations such as social norms, shared beliefs and expectations.

In Sierra Leone, for example, government health workers receive biomedical training to develop their technical competence to diagnose and treat patients (Denney *et al.*, 2015). But where staff have poor relationships with the communities they are supposed to serve (e.g. by holding dismissive attitudes towards patients) or perform illicit activities (e.g. charging patients for medicine that should be free at the point of service), a government's capacity to provide health services is undermined. This is not a result of technical incompetence or absence of rules, but of the nature of relationships between users and providers.

These less visible, more socio-cultural characteristics are arguably some of the most pivotal determinants of capacity, partly because they underlie all else, and partly because they are embedded in the historical and cultural context of particular places.

Policy implications

Start from an understanding of how people use services in practice and what this means for how they experience the state. This means thinking about how children and parents are treated by teachers at school, rather than just counting how many school classrooms have been

State-building is about far more than delivering 'core functions'. The question of how different people within society relate to the state – for example, through the experience of service delivery – demands greater attention.

constructed. Also ask which service facilities people are using and their reasons for doing so: what is driving their education- or health-seeking behaviour? The relationships people have with providers and frontline staff, based on prior experiences, often come into this.

Focus not on what a given programme can do, but on what would need to change for services to be more effectively delivered. The point here is on quality. Effective services require effective systems. Getting children into school or patients into clinics is one thing; making sure they have positive experiences and benefit from them is another. Greater emphasis should be placed on delivering better quality services – and finding effective, practical ways of monitoring quality over time.

Start thinking about service-delivery programming less in terms of tangible assets and structures – service-delivery facilities, human resourcing, payroll systems – and more in terms of the relationships and behaviours through which people experience service delivery. Systems are multi-dimensional. They are partly about the right ‘hardware’ being in place, but they are also about the ‘softer’ aspects of social norms, attitudes and relationships. How are users being treated? Is the nature of that treatment potentially undermining not only the quality of the service but also their views towards the state? Of course, there is no easy answer as to how one works on these soft systemic capacities. But reframing can help us move away from a narrow focus on technical building blocks and towards understanding what allows positive change to happen.

5 Supporting state-building, service delivery and recovery means engaging with power and politics beyond government alone

There has been growing recognition within the wider literature that all development is political. SLRC’s work adds further grist to the mill, shedding light on the many ways in which power and politics infuse state-building, service delivery and recovery.

These processes are sometimes treated as technical exercises guided by ideas of ‘best practice’ and ‘gap filling’ – e.g. economic growth is slow because individuals lack access to credit, healthcare is poor because staff lack technical competence, or state legitimacy is weak because core state functions are not being delivered. The common policy response is to fill in the blanks by drawing on templates that work in other places, with less regard for whether the inputs actually fit the context.

Of course, there is a place for technical solutions, and there always will be. But these are partial solutions at best. What SLRC’s evidence clearly shows is that the capacity to get things done – whether that’s a provider seeking to deliver effective basic services or an individual attempting to successfully navigate their local labour market – ultimately comes down to a question of power.

Key issues include how the actions and behaviours of other actors can both constrain and facilitate performance, often depending on identity-based factors. For example, the research on jobs and livelihoods illustrates how certain social groups find it easier to enter and participate in labour markets by virtue of their social status, negotiating power and access to the ‘right’ sort of networks. This deeply gendered and intersectional regulation of opportunity is found across diverse contexts, from Afghanistan (Pain and Mallett, 2014) to Uganda (Mallett and Atim, 2014) to Sri Lanka (Jayasekara and Najab, 2016) (and is of course not limited to conflict-affected or ‘developing’ countries alone).

What also comes out strongly is the fact that the regulation of a system – say, a local economy or health system – is multidimensional: while their actions are often important, it is not just about what governments do. SLRC’s work on informal taxation reveals how payments enforced by a range of actors through non-codified means often define what it is like to navigate local economies (Lough *et al.*, 2015). These look different depending on context, but can include taxes administered by insurgent groups (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam being one example) and other contributions to local public-goods provision that blur the voluntary/involuntary boundary (such as those underpinned by religious or social obligation).

And so too with service delivery. In countries affected by and recovering from conflict, it is a common policy assumption that core functions, including the provision of basic services, ought to be handled by government. As a result, aid tends to focus on building up the administrative capacities of governments to deliver frontline services.

SLRC’s research suggests there are at least two reasons to question this assumption, logical as though it may seem. The first is that, as the panel survey findings show, the specific identity of service providers does not appear to drastically shape people’s perceptions of government. This casts doubt over the claim that non-government service delivery automatically undermines legitimisation processes.

Secondly, the intuitive tendency to privilege administrative government capacities overlooks the way in which ‘real systems’ actually work. Delivery systems are often plural, comprising multiple actors. As SLRC’s work in Sierra Leone demonstrates, understanding what drives people’s



Even where government regulation is absent, service delivery and markets are still governed. Understanding how, means getting beyond analysis of ‘the formal’.

choices and behaviour when it comes to accessing services is complicated – there are often several factors at play (Denney *et al.*, 2014). But the fact is, there are reasons why some government-run facilities are actively avoided and non-government alternatives are sought. Failing to acknowledge this leads to programming that ignores a) the capacities of providers that really matter locally, and b) the way in which governments relate to those actors (note the relational argument made above). This was particularly apparent during the initial stages of the West African Ebola crisis, which saw containment and prevention strategies driven through formal government channels and bypassing influential traditional healers. Evidence suggests that it was not until the latter were properly engaged, that real progress occurred.

Policy implications

Invest in better, more localised understandings of how power and politics shape state-building, service delivery and recovery. Assumptions about how we think systems ought to work often drive policy. But ‘real systems’ are what really matter, and they need to be understood before engagement occurs. Without contextual knowledge of what constrains people’s participation in the labour market or deters their use of government-run services, for example, interventions risk targeting the wrong things. More often than not, power and politics lie at the heart of these questions.

Adopt a multidimensional perspective on power and regulation. Governments aren’t the only ones shaping state-building, service delivery and recovery. These processes are subject to *governance* in a broader sense, and programming needs to be able to handle the dynamics of this. So too are there different layers or levels of power. In a simple sense, there is the ‘big-P’ politics that characterises power-sharing, prioritisation of investments, and allocation of resources across societies and economies. Then there is the ‘small-p’ politics that infuses human relationships: individual capacities to secure decent work opportunities or deliver effective services are heavily dependent on relational factors, including social status, bargaining power and access to the ‘right’ networks. All of these dimensions are relevant for programming that seeks to improve outcomes for the poor.

Focus on structural constraints, not just individual skills and capacities. The fact that power and politics are what determine outcomes and trajectories implies the need to look beyond individuals alone. Policies continue to emphasise human agency – equipping people with information and knowledge, providing skills training and financial capital – without a full consideration of the way people’s surrounding environments profoundly affect their ability to perform. Engaging more with these wider, mediating dimensions of capacity is essential.

Towards a new agenda for working in fragile and conflict-affected situations: key principles for future programming

We hope that the five overarching findings described above can help policy-makers, practitioners and the research community understand how processes of state-building and recovery work in a more nuanced way.

But in order for these findings to be put into action, how does practice need to change? What does appropriate engagement look like, and how should key decision-makers adapt their approaches?

Without changes in the way interventions are designed and implemented, policies risk failing to cohere with the processes they are intended to support.

To this end, we conclude with four core principles for policy and programme design in fragile and conflict-affected situations, particularly in relation to state-building and recovery.

- 1 Be more realistic about timelines over which recovery takes place.** Recognise and embrace the complexity of post-conflict trajectories. This means programming in ways that move beyond the binaries all too often found in donor programming – that countries are either conflict or post-conflict, that governments are either good or bad, that programming is either humanitarian or developmental, that services are optimally delivered either by government providers or by non-government actors. Complexity also requires us to accept that ‘all good things do not always go together’. SLRC’s research shows that progress in one area (for example, reduction in conflict) might not run parallel with other improvements that we hope for (such as food security, or perceptions of safety). For donors, in particular, this means programming with precariousness in mind – of improvements in livelihoods, of trust in government, of political settlements or of peace agreements.
- 2 Recognise that conflict is only part of the picture.** Many of the shocks and stresses that undermine recovery and political stability extend far beyond conflict. Donors should pay more attention to how conflict intersects with environmental challenges, economic shocks and other obstacles to the improvement of people’s livelihoods. Don’t spend time only thinking about fragile and conflict-affected countries as a distinct category but consider their similarities with other less conflict-affected neighbours: DRC has as much, if not more, in common with Zambia as it does with Pakistan or the Solomon Islands.

3 Think local and build from there. Scale and coverage are important. But big programmes need to cohere with local circumstances. More nuanced analysis is needed at the local level to inform what might work best in specific places. This implies a need for more flexible programming – to be adaptable and to respond with local solutions when things don't work well.

4 Start with people themselves and what they need. Use this principle to define the required function of interventions, and of organisations and states. Avoid assumed forms of organisations and state roles that don't reflect existing power relations, norms, values and expectations of people at the local level. Do not set out with the notion that conflict creates 'blank slates': there is always *something* there. The overriding message here is about working with what you've got and building on it. 'Working with the grain' doesn't have to mean international actors simply accepting bad policies, programmes and ineffective organisations, but it does allow realistic and achievable goals to be set.

This briefing was written by Rachel Slater and Richard Mallett of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, but reflects the work of all partners of the Consortium between 2011 and 2017. The findings are drawn from a series of synthesis reports that pull together SLRC's evidence on each of its work streams at the end of its first phase:

- Service delivery, public perceptions and state legitimacy
- Service delivery and state capacity
- Livelihoods, conflict and recovery
- Markets, conflict and recovery
- Tracking livelihoods, service delivery and governance: panel survey findings

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