

## IDD Policy Brief: Rethinking the Institutional Approach to Statebuilding

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Definitions of 'the state' in the academic and policy literature on statebuilding are influential, yet often unacknowledged. In this Brief, Nicolas Lemay-Hébert outlines the implications of the dominant 'institutional' understanding of statehood, and of an alternative.

### Key messages

- Every contribution to the academic or policy literature on statebuilding adopts, consciously or unconsciously, a definition of the type of state that is to be built. These definitions need to be examined because they influence statebuilding interventions.
- The dominant understanding of the state focuses on institutions. This has led to an approach to statebuilding that equates a state's strength with the capacity of its institutions to assert state authority.
- This 'institutional' approach promotes: 1) the measurement of states against a Western model of statehood; 2) an apolitical perspective in which institutions are dissociated from their socio-political context; and 3) the belief that more external intervention is better.
- The other main understanding of the state focuses on the broader social system, and has influenced a 'legitimacy' approach to statebuilding. This approach highlights the need for indigenous institutions to develop a collective identity and foster social cohesion so as to be considered legitimate by citizens. Its implications include the importance of donor sensitivity to socio-political processes that promote or undermine legitimate governance.

Read the full Policy Brief: [Rethinking the Institutional Approach to Statebuilding \(PDF, 256\) \(/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/idd/policy-brief/12-2012-nicolas-lemay-hebert.pdf\)](#)