

## Rethinking the institutional approach to statebuilding

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What type of state does statebuilding seek to promote? Definitions of 'the state' in the academic and policy literature on statebuilding are influential, yet often unacknowledged. This brief outlines the implications of the dominant 'institutional' understanding of statehood, and of an alternative.



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### 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.

Policymakers' definitions of the state – and state strength and weakness – affect statebuilding interventions. However, the type of state that statebuilding seeks to promote is rarely discussed (Marquette and Beswick, 2011: 1706).

The 'state' tends to be understood in two main ways – as the apparatus of government, or as the social system subject to that government (Giddens, 1985: 17). The former understanding has dominated academic and policy debates. Based on an interpretation of Max Weber's thinking, it focuses mainly on state institutions.

### The 'institutional' approach

Weber defined the state as 'a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (1948: 78). He viewed the state in physical and institutional terms, and saw administrative capacity and the provision of security as key indicators of state strength (Badie and Birnbaum, 1983). The institutional approach to statehood and statebuilding developed as other authors emphasised further factors related to the ability of state institutions to assert authority over society.

This approach has permeated policy and practice. Definitions of state collapse and fragility in the policy literature have tended to emphasise state structures and functions. Likewise, statebuilding interventions have often focused on institutional reconstruction.

### The 'legitimacy' approach

The second main understanding of the state focuses on the broader social system. Emile Durkheim, for example, viewed the state as the beliefs that a society has worked out collectively over time (Durkheim 1957: 79–80).

Influenced by Durkheim, a more holistic conception of statehood and statebuilding has developed. This emphasises socio-political cohesion and consensus, drawing attention to the state's legitimacy. For instance, Barry Buzan highlights 'the idea of the state' – a society's implicit social contract and ideological consensus. He identifies this as one of three interdependent elements of the state, the other two being the physical and institutional elements (1991: 64; Holsti, 1996: 98).

'Donors could continue to adapt their organisational cultures so as to apply the principle of local ownership more effectively.'

According to this alternative approach, state legitimacy is associated with society's collective identity and beliefs. Legitimacy becomes a two-way process – the extent to which people consent to the rules within which political institutions function, 'either because the political institutions are seen as having gained authority through some legitimate process, and/or because they are seen to represent ideas or values widely supported' (Kaldor 2000: 285). This understanding contrasts with that of the institutional approach, which tends to view legitimacy as either an automatic by-product of functioning institutions, or as a one-way process of seeking to justify the central authority.

### Implications of the institutional approach

A focus on institutional capacity as the key element of state strength encourages the use of an idealised 'developed' (Western) state as a universal standard of statehood against which other states can be measured. This overlooks the capacities of informal and traditional institutions to provide public goods. It equates state failure with 'underdevelopment', and encourages attempts to forecast state collapse by assessing state structures.

A second implication of the institutional approach for statebuilding interventions is

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insufficient attention to politics. A focus on government institutions encourages a technocratic perspective that dissociates institutions from their socio-political context. It promotes the view that externally-led statebuilding can be conducted without affecting socio-political cohesion.

This view leads to the assumption that more intrusive interventions will reconstruct institutions more effectively (Lemay-Hébert, 2011a; Zuercher, 2006: 2). The 'more is better' perspective informed flawed international administration projects in Kosovo, Timor-Leste and Iraq (Lemay-Hébert, 2011b).

### Building what type of state?

The dominant 'institutional' approach to statebuilding can be contested. One alternative is the 'legitimacy' approach. While acknowledging the importance in statebuilding of institutional capacity and the provision of security, this approach also recognises the importance of socio-political processes that promote or undermine legitimate governance.

### Implications of the legitimacy approach

The extent to which external actors can support indigenous institutions to develop a collective identity and social cohesion is still debated.

Lemay-Hébert, N., 2011a. The Bifurcation of the Two Worlds: Assessing the Gap Between the Internationals and Locals in State-Building Processes. *Third World Quarterly* 32 (10), 1823–1841.

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However, donors could continue to adapt their organisational cultures so as to:

- Invest in analysis and ways of working that develop greater understanding of existing institutions, and of how proposed interventions could affect socio-political cohesion
- Pay greater attention to local perceptions of legitimacy
- Apply more effectively the principle of local ownership as central to statebuilding processes, not just as an end goal.

Following identity-based conflicts, donors could also give greater consideration to supporting social cohesion through reconciliation processes (see Haider, 2012).

### Learn more

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### About IDD

The University of Birmingham's multi-disciplinary International Development Department (IDD) has been providing knowledge and consultancy services to the international development sector since 1964.