Rethinking the institutional approach to statebuilding

Nicolas Lemay-Hébert

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.

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.

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 Bimbaum, 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.

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 institutional approach also recognises the importance of functioning institutions, or as a one-way process of seeking to justify the central authority.

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.

References

About the author
Nicolas Lemay-Hébert is a Marie Curie Experienced Researcher at IDD. He co-leads the research cluster ‘Civil wars, intervention and statebuilding’ at the University of Birmingham’s Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security. His research interests include peacebuilding and statebuilding, humanitarian response, and local narratives of resistance to international interventions.

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 1984.

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

Contact us
International Development Department
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT
United Kingdom
idd@bham.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)121 414 5009

Sharing knowledge, shaping futures
www.birmingham.ac.uk/idd