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PEACEBUILDING FROM BELOW: THE ROLE OF DECENTRALIZED SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION IN AFRICA

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The problem of violent conflict and the instability it creates remains a major global preoccupation, owing to the recognition that development can hardly take root in such settings and that conflict-affected states could be breeding grounds for all kinds of international insecurity.

INTRODUCTION

Significant international investment has been placed in peacebuilding and statebuilding, particularly in Africa, which is home to 13 of the 18 countries that comprise the G7+ group of fragile and conflict-affected states. Yet, as the recurrent instability on the continent suggests, the returns on this investment have been minimal if not nonexistent. With the dissatisfactory results from international peace-building efforts came waves

of criticism on the dominant peace-building and state-building paradigm in academic and policy circles. A major outcome has been the ascendancy of the idea that the problem of conflict and state fragility in Africa should not be understood simply as a failure of governance capacity, following a Weberian conception of the state as a rational-legal entity. Conversely, it should be seen as a symptom of the weak position that the mod-



ern African state occupies in relation to a complex web of informal social structures, which exert influence in the public space on the basis of personal loyalties (ethnic, clan, religious or regional) other than national loyalty. This crisis is a reflection of the incomplete process of state formation in post-colonial Africa, which produced states that have never been fully institutionalized, but have had to share authority over the public space with other, and at times stronger, forms of social relations.¹

This understanding questions the notion of peacebuilding as statebuilding, which underpins the liberal peace consensus. It has often prioritized approaches that depoliticize the latter, reducing it to activities to strengthening the technical capacity of government institutions and making it a prerequisite for the latter. Alternatively, it advocates an approach to conflict that considers statebuilding and peacebuilding as dynamic and mutually-reinforcing processes, recognizing the network of (in) formal institutions and fragmented social authority that requires delicate management, as well as historical grievances and concerns that must be addressed. The goal of post-conflict intervention should therefore be not just to strengthen the capacity and authority of the state in relation to other social arrangements, but also to reduce resistance to its authority by strengthening its legitimacy in the eyes of different societal groups. Two key principles are implied in this new paradigm. First, peacebuilding and statebuilding must be endogenous and context-specific. Although international support remains vital for the success of peacebuilding and state-building efforts, such support should seek to reinforce homegrown initiatives, which are responsive to local dynamics, rather than impose foreign models on the affected state. Second, peacebuilding and statebuilding should be inclusive, participatory, and multi-level pro-

cesses. This is essential for building broad national consensus, which legitimizes the emerging state institutions. An effective system of decentralized governance is a major institutional driver of sustainable peacebuilding and statebuilding in post-conflict settings. Given the challenges of capacity that typically undermine effective local governance in post-conflict environments, this policy brief argues that in its decentralized form, South-South cooperation offers an adaptable and complementary framework of international development cooperation that can be harnessed to support context-sensitive, socially inclusive, and ideologically neutral peace-building and state-building efforts in conflict-burdened Africa.

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ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL:² LOCAL GOVERNANCE, PEACEBUILDING, AND STATEBUILDING

The imperative of peacebuilding and statebuilding unfolding within broader socio-political processes that seek to encourage a sense of inclusiveness, reconciliation, justice, and cohesion within society inevitably raises the relevance of local governance in conflict-affected settings. It is at the local level that the social cleavages erupt into violent conflict or produce what James Scott refers to as everyday resistance, which ultimately weakens state authority, are made manifest.³ For example, the conflicts in countries like the DRC, Sudan, Somalia, and Mali share a common feature in that they are in some form associated with localized grievances and power struggles. On one hand these grievances and tensions reflect the weak institutionalization of the state in these countries. On the other hand, they have contributed to reducing and replacing state-bound identities and loyalties with those anchored in ethnicity, clan, religion or region, thereby further diminishing the authority and legitimacy



of the state. The case of the DRC is especially telling in this regard. The historical disharmony between the *Banyarwanda* and other local groups in eastern Congo has been mismanaged and conveniently manipulated by successive Congolese governments. In effect, it continues to encourage localized dynamics of conflict which has contributed to stifling the political transition in the country.⁴ Building sustainable peace and restoring trust in the institutions of the state in such settings necessitates a commitment to inclusive and legitimate political processes that guarantee the interests and participation of all groups in society. This is where decentralized structure of governance and effective local governance become critical to peacebuilding and statebuilding.

Despite its reputation as the epicenter of major violent conflicts and resistance to state authority, the local level can also be transformed into a strategic catalyst for sustainable peacebuilding and statebuilding. Effective local governance not only broadens the deliberative space for inclusive decision-making, but also affords marginalized and minority groups channels through which to represent their interests. This is crucial in alleviating tensions resulting from social exclusion or regional disparities, and developing non-sectarian identities and a sense of belonging, which are all necessary for building trust in the institutions of the state. Unlike distant national institutions, local governments have a greater ability to interact with community groups, traditional authorities, warlords and other spoilers of peace. This leaves them with a deep understanding of intergroup relations and local power structures, and therefore puts them in a privileged position to mitigate conflict and foster social cohesion. In previously authoritarian regimes, with little democratic experience and culture, local governance also presents the best institutional mechanism through which community/indigenous experiences in accountable, participatory, and deliberative processes (embodied by structures such as Street Committees in apartheid South Africa) can be harnessed towards construct-

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ing a democratic state from the bottom up.

The ability of local governments to provide basic services to local populations in an efficient and equitable manner, offers an entry point for extending the visibility of the state beyond a few metropolitan areas, while improving its credibility. Though the use of non-state actors to deliver basic services in post-conflict settings seems to have become an acceptable practice among donor countries, there is no gainsaying that this practice is unsustainable and in most cases actually works against the long-term capacity of the state. Conversely, when local governments are enabled to provide basic services in the post-conflict period when other institutions of the state are barely functioning, the exercise of this responsibility becomes a confidence-building mechanism, which develops the long-term capacity of the state to deliver these services. After all, the essence of state formation is to facilitate the provision of public goods i.e. security, order, social services or economic opportunities, and it is the inefficient exercise of this responsibility that undergirds social and political strife. The role of local governments as catalysts of economic development can be leveraged to address the socio-economic causes of conflict through the equitable distribution of peace dividends. In the context of the inequality-inducing neoliberal macroeconomic policies that are foisted on post-conflict states,⁵ inclusive local economic development can be the difference between a return to social instability



and the consolidation of peace.⁶

However, local governments in Africa face significant resource and capacity challenges, which undermine any potential role they could play as peace-building and state-building agents. This

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constraint is exacerbated by the tendency of external actors to focus their peace-building and state-building interventions at the national level neglecting the restoration of government capacity on the periphery. In the few instances where a multi-level approach has been adopted as part of bilateral or multilateral post-conflict interventions, local government capacity building has been undertaken mainly as a “trickle down” of national governance reforms, overlooking the unparalleled empowerment and capacity-building benefits that come with horizontal or peer-to-peer cooperation.

DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION AND POST-CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING AND STATEBUILDING

Decentralized cooperation, the sort undertaken by local governments, has at least three advantages over traditional forms of post-conflict interventions for institutional capacity building. First, capacity building initiatives, in this context, are undertaken as long-term partnerships involving two or more local governments, which allow for an exchange

of knowledge, best practices, and experiences. This contributes to promoting adaptability, ownership, and sustainability of the capacity-building initiative. This is impossible where efforts to strengthen local government are undertaken exclusively through independent consultants whose contact with the local government is restricted to the project’s lifespan, or as part of decentralization processes with national governments acting as gatekeepers. Furthermore, decentralized cooperation does not only take place among actors with similar experiences and challenges in the formulation and administration of public policy at the local level, but also comes with less of the paternalistic and ideological baggage, which have been blamed for the failure of traditional approaches to peacebuilding and statebuilding in Africa. This is where decentralized cooperation intersects with South-South cooperation to provide a complementary framework for peacebuilding and statebuilding that is democratically oriented yet displays contextual and cultural sensitivity. South-South cooperation is seen to have a greater appeal in Africa than traditional North-South cooperation, because it occurs in the context of similar historical and cultural experiences; entails less of the *transfer* of expertise, and more *sharing* of experiences, best practices, and lessons learned in a more collegial setting; puts a high premium on stimulating local capacities, philosophies, and comparative advantages rather than seek to supplant these with foreign and supposedly superior knowledge.⁷

Decentralized cooperation involving Brazilian local governments and their Mozambican counterparts is illustrative of the potential in South-South cooperation as a framework for peacebuilding and statebuilding. As Siteo and Hunguana note, a key safety valve designed to preserve and deepen Mozambique’s hard-won peace after 16 years of civil war was the launch of a process of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization. The ultimate goal was to strengthen the legitimacy of



the state and promote social cohesion by creating avenues for the participation of all groups and individuals in the governing processes and development of the country.⁸ However, the authors also point out that the ability of local governance to contribute to peacebuilding in Mozambique by catalyzing inclusive political participation, local economic development, and social justice has been hampered by, among other factors, a stalling decentralization process and a weak resource and capacity base in most of the country's municipalities.⁹ In this context, Mozambican municipalities have sought support from Brazilian cities like Guarulhos, Porto Alegre, and Belo Horizonte, which experienced similar challenges, but have distinguished themselves as pioneers in participatory and inclusive governance in the developing world.

Cooperation between Brazilian local governments and their Mozambican counterparts has evolved through different frameworks, but has focused on the exchange of experiences and best practices to develop the municipal management capacity of participating entities. One such framework adjoins six Brazilian cities – Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, Guarulhos, Canoas, Victoria, and Maringa – and their Mozambican counterparts of Xai-Xai, Lichinga, Matola, Maputo, Inhambane, Dondo, Nampula, and Manhica.¹⁰ While more research is required around the execution of this initiative to assess its impact, its potential contribution to peacebuilding and statebuilding in Mozambique is nonetheless underscored by the fact that cooperation focused on participatory budgeting, inclusive citizenship, and strategic planning. These aspects are central to transforming local governments into laboratories for equitable people-centered politics.

The peer-learning initiative involving the Mozambican city of Maputo, its Brazilian counterparts of Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre, as well as the South African city of Durban provides practical insight into the potential role of decentralized South-South cooperation in peacebuilding and statebuilding. With a focus on the informal local

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economy, the knowledge exchange gave Maputo the opportunity to learn from the experience of its southern peers on integrating social inclusion policies into local economic development. The importance of strong local government capacity in this area cannot be understated against the backdrop of studies, which have revealed that free market economic policies and economic growth in post-war Mozambique have been accompanied by deepening poverty. This threatens social stability.¹¹ Other features of the initiative are worth highlighting to further illustrate the potential of South-South cooperation to sustainable peacebuilding and statebuilding. The first relates to the demand-driven nature of the initiative, which not only assures local ownership, but also ensures the cooperation and the lessons learned are relevant to the local context. Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, and Durban bring to the partnership a historical context and socio-economic experience that is familiar to Maputo. Equally important is the collaborative and reflective approach that characterized the capacity-building exercise, which also included an element of stakeholder participation, reflected in the visit to the Maputo market to assess the perspective and experience of informal traders. A third aspect of the knowledge exchange and capacity-building initiative worth emphasizing centers on the documentation and dissemination of the exercise's outcomes among other Mozambican local governments. This not only extends the benefits of the



initiative, but serves as a safeguard against regional asymmetries that may arise from decentralized cooperation.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Notwithstanding the preceding argument, the effectiveness of decentralized South-South cooperation as a complementary framework would remain contingent on the convergence of the correct attitude and a conducive policy environment at local, national, and international levels. This is necessary to mitigate the effect of the challenges that may undermine the contributions of decentralized cooperation. First, local governments in Africa, especially those in countries emerging from conflict, are exposed to the temptation of wanting to focus cooperation with their southern counterparts on quick-win projects rather than on long-term capacity building and institutional support. The fact that capacity building in this regard is often undertaken as part of broad partnerships comes with the risk that it may be overshadowed by other components of the partnership, such as economic cooperation and the delivery of social development projects. Second, although some local governments in middle-income developing countries boast of exceptional knowledge and experience in local governance, it is typically the case that they lack the requisite resources and technical expertise to engender sustainable capacity-building partnerships that benefit their counterparts. The third challenge is related to the weak culture of decentralized governance in Africa, which on the one hand is evinced in the stalling or rolling back of decentralized reforms across the continent. On the other hand, it encourages the elite capture of local government institutions in some countries.

These and other challenges bring to the fore the imperative for strong institutional backstops for decentralization cooperation, if it is to play a catalytic

role. Such support is crucial not just to underwrite the costs entailed, but to focus cooperation on areas that are essential to the development of local government capacity. For example, Brazil's Program for Decentralized South-South Technical Cooperation allows the country's local governments to make use of the financial and technical support of the Brazilian Agency for Cooperation. This permits the sharing of successful public policies with southern counterparts and offers a model for institutional support that can be emulated and adapted by other development agencies to support decentralized capacity building. A decentralized version of triangular cooperation also provides a sound institutional framework for supporting south-south knowledge exchanges dedicated to local government capacity building. This would allow participating southern local governments to tap into the experience that local governments in the North have amassed over decades within the framework of North-South cooperation. Consequentially, harnessing the potential of decentralized south-south cooperation for post-conflict peacebuilding and statebuilding requires a renewed commitment at local, national, and international levels, to a decentralized system of governance in Africa. This means devising effective governance mechanisms that would balance the need for maneuvering space for local governments with the imperatives of maintaining state cohesion and encouraging grassroots democracy. It is perhaps befitting to conclude with the caveat that while coordination and support is essential to decentralized cooperation's functioning, it should not be reduced to paternalistic control or time-consuming regulations and complicated funding requirements that strip decentralized cooperation of its most rewarding attributes – local ownership, flexibility, and innovativeness.



ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Moncef Kartas, Post-conflict Peacebuilding – Is the Hegemony of the ‘Good Governance’ Discourse Depoliticizing the Local? Paper prepared for the Nordic International Studies Association (NISA), Odense, Denmark, 24–25 May 2007; Patience Kabamba, ‘Heart of Darkness’, Current images of the DRC and their theoretical underpinning, *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2010, pp. 265-301. See also Seth Kaplan, *What the OECD does not understand about fragile states*, *Fragile States Resource Center*, 29 January 2013.
- 2 The origin of this phrase is attributed to Tip O’Neill, former-Speaker of the US House of Representatives.
- 3 See James Scott, 1985, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 4 See Sadiki Koko, Statebuilding, citizenship and the Banyarwanda question in the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, Vol. 35, No. 1, June 2013, pp. 41-77.
- 5 For more on the negative effects of neoliberal economic policies on post-conflict peacebuilding, see James Ahearne, *Neoliberal Economic Policies and Post-Conflict Peace-Building: A Help or Hindrance to Durable Peace?* *POLIS Journal*, Vol. 2, Winter 2009, online.
- 6 For more on the potential contribution of local governance to peacebuilding and statebuilding, see ‘Local Governance, peace building and state building in post-conflict settings: A UNDP Discussion Paper’, <http://uncdf.org/gfid/docs/post-conflict.pdf>
- 7 Zoë Scott, ‘Southern Perspectives on Technical Cooperation: Analytical Review and Annotated Bibliography’, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, July 2009, pp.1-5. See also Siphamandla Zondi, ‘Brazil and Africa: Cooperation for Endogenous Development?’ *Global Insight*, Issue 101, October 2013, p.4.
- 8 Eduardo Siteo and Carolina Hanguana, ‘Decentralization and sustainable peacebuilding in Mozambique: Bringing the elements together again’, CEDE research paper, October 2005, p.5, available online at <http://www.africancso.org/documents/10136/0/Mozambique+Decentralization+and+Peace+Building> accessed on 23 October 2013.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 8-14.
- 10 See ‘Meeting defines participation of Porto Alegre on partnership between cities from Brazil and Mozambique’,
- 11 See, for example, Joseph Hanlon and Milton Keynes, ‘Mozambique: “The war ended 17 years ago, but we are still poor”’, *Pambazuka News*, 5 March 2010.

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THE AFRICA PROGRAM AND THE PROJECT ON LEADERSHIP AND BUILDING STATE CAPACITY

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