Issues of governance and institution-building in conflict-affected countries*

Summary

Public administration plays an important role in developing integrated approaches to long-term development objectives in countries emerging from conflict and in addressing critical security issues. Progress in creating strong institutions for sustainable development in conflict-affected settings is, however, often hampered by the emphasis on short-term security needs, political interests, and external dependency, paired with multiple other challenges, which further undermine future State-building efforts, reinforce inequalities, and prolong the impact of conflict on local communities. Sustaining peace depends on the long-term engagement of all stakeholders in institution-building that is consistent with local norms and political realities, acknowledging that each society is different, as are the root causes of conflict in each situation. Recommended measures include bottom-up approaches addressing the root causes of conflict, the strengthening of tax collection systems, increased risk assessment and conflict prevention measures.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends the continuous work on building strong institutions for sustainable development in fragile and conflict-affected countries. The Committee notes that peacebuilding and sustainable peace depend on long-term engagement in institution-building involving all stakeholders that is consistent with local norms and political realities. The Committee look forward to further engagement in promoting effective governance for sustainable development in such situations and its contribution to the work of the Peacebuilding Commission. (Paragraph 9)

▶ See ECOSOC resolution 2022/9

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* Excerpt from Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Report on the twenty-first session. See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2022, Supplement No. 24 (E/2022/44-E/C.16/2022/9)

The Committee of Experts on Public Administration is a subsidiary body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) advising on issues related to governance and institution-building for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Discussion

Tension between political and developmental objectives

With reference to lessons from Afghanistan, the Committee notes that public administration plays an important role in developing integrated approaches to long-term development objectives in countries emerging from conflict and in addressing critical security issues. Security interests should not be prioritized over development as a focus on developmental objectives is more likely to have broader support and produce more durable results in the long term.

Political objectives can lead to mission creep, which contributes to tensions between political and developmental objectives, sometimes with profound effect, and should be guarded against. In the case of Afghanistan, mission creep led to an expanding security sector, as well as attempts to undermine that security, placing local delivery agents at risk and complicating development efforts.

Institutions and economic growth

Another major challenge in conflict-affected countries identified by the Committee is insufficient attention to economic development, coupled with poor tax collection, corruption, and the setting of unrealistic timelines. Loss of human capital, resulting from migration or interruptions in education and the long-term psychological impact of conflict on young people, further undermines future State-building efforts and reinforces inequalities. The long-term effects of conflict should be factored into development initiatives. Youth employment is a particular concern. Investments in education need to be made productive and accompanied by investments in physical capital.

External dependency

The Committee underscores that external dependency could result in limited incentive for political leaders and officials to tackle urgent issues such as corruption, if they believe that foreign forces would attend to those tasks; that could potentially lead to national governments struggling to support themselves after the departure of foreign forces.

Even if financial means are available for post-conflict recovery, their use might not lead to sustainable results due to different political interests. Another consequence of dependency and lack of planning is the absence of a sustainable tax base for maintaining State institutions.

Poor understanding of political dynamics

The Committee emphasizes that in State-building, there is a tendency to take a familiar approach to institution building on the assumption that familiar outcomes would be achieved. It is often assumed, for example, that rebuilding infrastructure and providing specific services that might conflict with the provision of existing community services will result in the increasing use of State services and a willingness to pay tax for those services. However, those results are not assured. The building of strong institutions also requires recognition of the fact that not all institutions will look the same, be constructed identically or enjoy similar levels of legitimacy. A key lesson learned from Afghanistan is that merely superimposing a set of State institutions on existing governance mechanisms can result in the

failure of the two layers of governance to connect and in the legitimacy of the State being undermined.

Interventions need to be contextually appropriate, acknowledging that each society is different, as are the root causes of conflict in each situation. Interventions need to be focused on processes as well as institutions, so that functions are prioritized over form and the interventions are politically astute. That approach involves working with local norms and political realities and requires incremental change over longer timescales than those often applied in accordance with best practices.

The structure and operation of State institutions is inherently political, so restructuring any of them will also be political, creating alternative views of what those institutions should be, as well as winners and losers. Reconciliation efforts are needed after conflict to reach consensus among different stakeholders regarding State-building.

Promoting bottom-up approaches to State-building

The Committee notes that many issues can arise from a misunderstanding of the local political terrain, such as when the local political system relies on a system of alliances that is difficult to manage. In such an inherently unstable system, a largely top-down approach to State-building will be difficult, especially if legitimate local actors cannot be incorporated using bottom-up approaches. Root causes of conflict could include battles over human rights, religious beliefs, or resources. The beneficiaries of State-building interventions should be clearly identified. Small actions can be carried out step-by-step for complicated problems that need a long time to address. A combination of authoritative, competitive, and collaborative approaches can help.

Understanding national and local political dynamics and using bottom-up approaches is crucial, including working with local actors that have legitimacy. That is especially important when government agencies are characterized by dysfunction, corruption, illegitimacy, or poor representation. Bottom-up approaches can also address the root causes of those issues and potentially challenge related power structures that might otherwise perpetuate poor governance and unresponsive, exclusive institutions.

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