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Failing States or Failing Models?: Accounting for the Incidence of State Collapse¹

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Introduction

In recent years the notion and phenomenon of 'failing' states - states deemed incapable to fulfil the basic tasks of providing security for their populace -, has been rapidly drawing attention. The incidence has been on the increase especially among countries of the South, and particularly, though not exclusively, in Africa. Among the explanations offered, fragility of state structures, lack of capacity and 'bad' governance have been recurrent ingredients put forward, though each of these inevitably begs further queries: why are they fragile to begin with, why is there this lack of capacity, and so forth. The phenomenon continues to prompt searches for explanation as well as contemplation of international policy responses.

Not a few of such explanatory explorations have tended to look for 'inherent', 'intrinsic' or other internal factors that might be held accountable for the weaknesses concerned. To be sure, the state systems concerned, or what remains of them, are generally not 'robust'. However, if we further probe into how they came to be this way, and what models for state building and developmental perspectives have been held out to them over the years, then this may require us to extend the perspective and ask whether it is just fragile and failing states we are looking at, or whether we also have to do with failing *models*? It seems useful to pose this question explicitly for further reflection, and to explore the links between failing models for state building and the realities of state failure that we may observe.

In taking this up, my point of departure will be to accept that connection and to approach the question in terms of a connection between fragile/failing states and of failing models. I will start off with a closer look at the incidence of fragile states and state failure, more specifically of state collapse. Connected with this, I will raise the question of differential degrees of propensity to failure and collapse among contemporary state systems, and to point to apparent regional variations in this regard.

Against this background, it will be useful to first switch back a moment and recall how in a sense the Cold War had the effect of stabilizing various post-colonial state systems in the South and re-affirming the nation-building model on the basis of which they had started out on their trajectories of independent statehood. Thereafter, in the years following the Cold War, the global environment changed abruptly and drastically: there were successive waves of external inroads into the state systems of the South which represented ever so many novel models for state building, though in the end leaving many of them weakened rather than strengthened to fulfil their basic functions. The hitherto prevalent idea of 'the relative autonomy' of the state suffered a severe setback in reality as well as in theorizing on the state (Doornbos 2001).

As state fragility became more pervasive, the incidence of state collapse also became less exceptional. Yet, to better understand and respond to situations of state collapse, I shall argue, it will be important to differentiate between different trajectories put into motion after the lifting of hegemonic frameworks. In response to this, rather than trying to develop general blueprints for intervention, external actors would do better by *de-generalizing* about causes and possible remedies to state collapse. This will be essential in the search for meaningful fresh starts, which as a matter of principle should allow a central rather than a spectators' role to domestic political actors and give them a chance to regain a basic autonomy of action.

Incidence of state collapse

State collapse should refer to situations that occur when 'the basic functions of the state are no longer performed' (Zartman 1995: 5), that is, when they have ground to a halt due to severe internal conflicts, lack of proper management of resources, or other causes. Such situations tend to represent the most far-going or extreme form and 'proof' of state fragility, fragmentation and disintegration. In the light of its growing incidence in the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium, a newly emerging theme in international policy analysis became that of addressing "the challenge of rebuilding war-torn societies" (Bastian and Luckham 2003, *Journal of Peace Research* 2002, Milliken 2003). The challenge refers to the increasing number of countries, in Europe as well as in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where the very fabric of society and institutional structures became torn apart as a result of civil war and prolonged violent conflict, or in some cases due to external interventions. In several of these situations, the continued existence of countries as distinct political entities, let alone as 'national' states, appeared to have become precarious, uncertain, or outright impossible. Recent examples include Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia and El Salvador. But the category might at some point also come to embrace countries like Sudan, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Haiti, Tadjikistan, and others within the foreseeable future, as the dimension of fragility is probably much wider than can be witnessed from the instances of states that have actually fragmented or collapsed. Increasingly, international agencies, somehow representing a new type of 'staying' element in a rapidly changing global context, find themselves called upon to restore law and order and to initiate peace-building processes in such internal conflict situations (Moore 1996).

In recent years, several dozen such active UN operations have been started across the globe, a number which may be expected to further increase in the years to come. The post '9/11' era offers a rapidly changing context for the emergence and handling of these dynamics, including the possibili-

ty of unpredictable as well as unprecedented superpower interventions, or their absence precisely where they might have been called for. Recurrent external admonitions propagating 'good governance', decentralization and state restructuring in other respects, added a further layer of complexity to the relations at stake. Uncertain futures, marked by queries about the premises, direction and viability of state forms or alternative political formula, came to present increasingly familiar yet agonizing questions with respect to the global political landscape.

Clearly, one thing we thus need is to better understand trajectories of state decline: current rethinking on the past and future of states demands that we raise questions such as why do states collapse, why do some states seem to collapse more readily than others, and why and how are some states subject to pervasive degeneration while others retain greater resilience and integration? Among other things, this will call for distinctions between different types of and trajectories to collapse. And there is also the basic and intriguing question as to what lies 'beyond collapse'. In broad historical perspective, it has been argued, '[c]ollapse, far from being an anomaly, both in the real world and in social evolutionary theory, presents in dramatic form not the end of social institutions, but almost always the beginning of new ones' (Eisenstadt 1988: 293). With respect to the contemporary drama, in similar vein, Ali Mazrui raised the intriguing question: 'Have Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Angola, Burundi been experiencing the death pangs of an old order dying and groaning for refuge? Or are we witnessing the birth pangs of a real but devastating birth of a genuinely post-colonial order?' (Mazrui 1955: 22). Before any such fundamental resurrection may take place, however, the state systems concerned may well find themselves in a state of limbo or prolonged statelessness, like in recent years in Somalia.

Opposite though they are in terms of their direction, dynamics of state formation and state failure culminating in state collapse appear to belong to the same field of analysis, conceptually speaking. State formation, which almost invariably is a long-term process, may be said to be taking place wherever a state system establishes, extends or enhances its capacity to overcome challenges to its territorial and institutional integrity and succeeds in playing a pivotal coordinating role in initiating integrative economic and social policies. State failure may manifest itself through incapacity of the state to prevent or curb pervasive violence and insecurity, mitigate ethnic or religious conflicts, or to contain arbitrary and oppressive action by its army or other state agencies. State collapse constitutes the ultimate phase in any such spiral of deteriorating political dynamics, characterized by the wholesale disintegration and falling apart of a state's institutional fabric. The notion of 'cascading fragilities', with its implied focus on *processes* of collapse, can serve heuristic purposes in this connection.

Propensity to state collapse

But questions about the future of the state or state systems do not merely concern the changing nature of their 'core' business and related structuring. By implication they also relate to their relative capacity to 'adjust' and maintain themselves in an increasingly capricious global environment, or, in other words, to their propensity to survive rather than collapse. That, it could be argued, is also part of their core business. Ever since 'structural adjustment' was adopted as a strategy of intervention by the major global financial institutions, massive evidence has been accumulating to attest to the impacts in terms of the increasing social and economic vulnerabilities of numerous groups and individuals in countries of the South, and the weakening capacity of state systems to provide them with basic social security. In not a few instances, growing livelihood insecurities have led to widespread destitution, intensified rural-urban and trans-national migration and social conflicts, increasing the chances of political failure to cope with these deteriorating conditions, and in the end with a question as to whether state institutions will be able to survive. Nonetheless, the impacts of global forces have been differential. Not all countries of the South have been equally vulnerable to state crisis and potential collapse. Some, particularly those that have been heavily dependent on agricultural production but were fetching lower and lower prices on the world market, have been hit especially severely. Others, which had the mixed blessing of being mineral-rich, or becoming the producers of profitable drugs, have also proven particularly vulnerable as governable state frameworks. Yet others, particularly those that managed to make their industrial entry into the global market, have instead proven remarkably resilient.

Regional variations

At the risk of over-generalization, there appear to be important regional dimensions to these patterns, with more instances of state systems in Africa having fallen victim to state failure and collapse than has been the case in Asia. Africa in recent years has gone on record with the cases of Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and basically Congo, while there have been other 'near-collapse' cases on an almost continuous basis. Earlier Chad, Angola, Mozambique, Uganda and Rwanda would similarly have ranked as failing, failed or collapsed states. Still, an equation of African states with state collapse needs to be qualified. In Asia and the Pacific, the cases of Afghanistan, Cambodia and earlier Lebanon, as well as 'potentials' like Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, suggest that though Africa has a stronger record of problem cases, it has no monopoly on state failure or state collapse.

At any rate, asking whether there has been a stronger *propensity* for state collapse in Africa than in Asia or elsewhere may be a more relevant enquiry than just trying to count the respective numbers of state failure and collapse at either end. If one were to do this, and ask why that could be the case, then such features like the relative extent of institutional cohesion, concentration of administrative power and especially the capacity for social mobilization within and through the state framework, may need to be recognized as of special significance. Beyond the crucial question as to how countries have come to be inserted in the world market, it is in the end these kinds of factors which appear to make a difference with respect to the extent to which societies and states have remained either relatively insulated from or become vulnerable to the risks of fragmentation and collapse. 'Propensity to collapse', in other words, could possibly be conceived as an alternative yardstick for assessing the nature and relative robustness of the state in its relations with the society and global environment.

But a fuller scrutiny of the 'propensity' question may also require us to look back into the respective historical records, including the differential ways in which Western imperialism has impacted on Asia, Africa and Latin America. By and large, Asian states, even if undergoing major structural transformations during colonialism, like in India, have known stronger continuities of political organization than has been the case in Africa. Asia has had a number of long-standing state entities, often largely inwardly-focused and with sizeable internal markets allowing significant degrees of economic differentiation and integration. Culturally, broad civilizational continuities in some of the major countries helped to sustain basic political and administrative cohesion and facilitate social mobilisation on virtually a mega scale (Kumar 1997). None of this was to preclude major violence and political upheavals at critical historical intervals, but surely there was a strong focus on continuity and preservation of the state systems. Colonial rule, severely impacting though it did, largely took the form of 'trickle-down' and (selective) absorption of Western elements, while by and large seeking to incorporate distinct pre-colonial polities into larger viable frameworks.

This stood in striking contrast to the African situation, characterized by fragmentation of the continent into arbitrary entities and the imposition of a wholly new and alien order. The resulting 'gap' in state-society relations in the African context has never really been closed since, and has been perpetuated through the lack of a political class which does *not* have its roots within one of the characteristic states' ethno-regional groups. Economic dynamics have not been able to counter these tendencies, but have, on the contrary, for a long time reinforced the presence and continuity of essentially vulnerable bureaucratic ruling classes. As contrasted to recurrent formative economic, political and cultural processes in several of the larger states of Asia, therefore, Africa's state systems appear to have been

bequeathed with a stronger baseline vulnerability and propensity for collapse. Africa's state formative processes in this regard have also been radically different from their European predecessors, in which more cohesive state-society linkages and stronger states were forged through taxation of the citizenry necessary in order to pay the armies that needed to be employed to fight off rival powers (Tilly 1992). In similar vein Mick Moore has further pointed to the vulnerability and weakness of governance structures of many countries in the South through scrutiny of their revenue basis (Moore 2004).

Latin America figures less distinctively in this equation. While most Latin American countries have been notably 'statist', in some like Argentine and Chili strong state systems were ruling over largely immigrant populations, whereas in others such as in most of the Andes countries states and urban classes alike have tended to confront an amalgam of indigenous rural communities. Neither of the two kinds of systems so far have been particularly known for their propensity to collapse, though the challenges to the state from different kinds of powerful popular movements in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Mexico have recently been clearly on the rise.

Effects of the Cold War

For a prolonged period of time, though, these state-society gaps and the potential fragility that comes with them were largely masked as an indirect effect of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the super-powers supported any client state they could win to their side whether democratic or not, giving it the means to suppress dissidents and other unwanted elements so as to keep the regime concerned in power (not unlike what has been happening more recently again in a number of cases in the 'war against terrorism'). Appearances of 'unity', integrity and 'sovereignty' were thus being kept up. Also, a basic 'nation state' model was not questioned. Independence had meant 'nation-building', i.e. the idea of trying to create national states out of an amalgam of ethnic, linguistic and other groups – which often had had little to do with one another or in some cases had had long histories of mutual rivalry and conflict. Quite a number of scholars adopted this perspective as well, and in fact there were few alternatives available. The 'nationalist' movement in many African cases had actually not run very deeply.

During the first decade or two of independence, African and other post-colonial states thus figured as the privileged partner of many aid agencies, the World Bank, and other donors, - so much so that critical voices on the left had begun to express concern about 'overdeveloped' state systems and their lack of performance and responsiveness to societal demands. For many years, in any case, in the implied policy debate on giving priority to

strengthening governmental capabilities *versus* responding to popular demands, the collective weight of the external variable had been biased squarely towards heightening the interventionist powers of the state.

External demands and inroads

After the Cold War, as inadequacies in 'governance' became increasingly apparent in various cases, like in several African countries or in Bangladesh, the World Bank and IMF, followed by the wider donor circuit, initiated a whole series of interventions to promote 'good governance': structural adjustment, economic liberalization and privatization were partly aimed at pushing back the predominance and power of state structures and were introduced in the expectation that 'civil society' would take over and play its game like in 19th/20th century Europe. This also marked the beginning of global thinking in terms of 'state failure': from that point onwards 'the state' (which until little earlier had been seen as the prime mover of everything that needed doing) began to be blamed for innumerable kinds of failures as diagnosed from the global development centres. As the notion of 'good governance' is highly amorphous while potentially referring to a wide range of qualities and indicators, state systems could be found faulty on the basis of shifting sets of criteria (Doornbos 2003). Global policies at the same time began to sideline the sovereign nation-state model, making room for new departures conveying externally designed models for statehood in the South.

In the course of the 1980s, from policy statements as well as actions, it became clear that the global organisations and the donor community began to embrace wholesale the critique of the 'overdeveloped state' which had earlier been espoused by radical scholars (often then to the irritation of those same organisations). The international community as led by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund began to show signs of a major reversal in its appreciation of the role of the African state in particular and seemed to opt for what might, at first sight, appear an almost anarchistic route. Earlier the exclusive recipient, partner and rationale of international aid and attention, the African state's 'most favoured' status increasingly appeared to get eclipsed in the eyes of donor organizations by a veil of assumed obsolescence. Aside from the chains of the debt burden, the autonomy of the African state was increasingly being bypassed and eroded by the international donor community in a whole range of critical ways such as:

- (1) advocacy of privatisation and of increasing involvement of private enterprise in aid arrangements;
- (2) significant diversion of aid funds *via* non-governmental organisations and channels;

- (3) the formation of donor co-ordinating consortia, with corresponding national counterpart 'front' organisations, which began to assume major policy roles in, for example, the planning and disbursement of food aid;
- (4) the rapidly growing donor specialisation and involvement in selected sectors and/or regions within African countries, facilitating a gradual shift of policy-preparation activities to donor headquarters, away from national co-ordinating ministries or organisations for the sector concerned;
- (5) donor preferences to work with autonomous 'non-bureaucratic' corporate statutory bodies, believed to combine the advantages of public jurisdiction and private discretionary powers and considered attractive as external agencies could establish close working relationships with them, thereby gaining direct influence
- (6) detailed specification of external parameters and prescriptions in national budgetary and policy processes; and
- (7) the introduction of highly advanced and sophisticated monitoring and evaluation methodologies, for which there was often insufficient national expertise available to constitute an effective counterpart in the policy discussion and implementation concerned (Mkandawire 2004, Morss 1984:465-470; Smith and Wood 1984:405-434; Wuyts 1989).

Also, in decentralisation policies, privatisation and non-government initiatives were increasingly being encouraged, occasionally leaving questions as to which bodies would theoretically still be responsible for guarding the 'common interest' (Meynen and Doornbos 2004). Most of these departures have been guiding global and donor policies until in fact today.

No doubt many of the policy initiatives concerned were motivated by earnest desires to raise the effectiveness of aid programmes, to make use of insights gained through experience, including earlier mistakes and generally to improve performance and outputs. Still, the combined impact, magnitude and complexity of all these incremental contributions by the collective international community began to constitute an overwhelming weight on the policy-making processes of individual African countries, for the totality of which nobody would take responsibility. Given the limited financial and staffing resources *vis-à-vis* this collective external expertise, the role of the national government often became necessarily limited to accepting - or possibly refusing to accept - ready-made policy packages prepared elsewhere or already agreed upon by the main donors.

Out of impatience with the poor formulation and implementation of plans by African states, various donor organisations and governments sought engagement in 'policy dialogue' - a process which is based less on equal

status of discussion partners than the name might suggest. However, the question is whether a critique on state *performance* justified the far-reaching interventions, verging on custodianship, which have been made into the policy determination of African states (Ravenhill 1988:179-210). One might wonder whether a point would not be reached where the state as the nerve centre for national policy-making could risk collapse under the collective weight of the international community's involvement and interventions, well-intentioned or otherwise. 'Policy dialogue', the international donor euphemism, paralleled the weakening capacity to keep control over one's own affairs in many cases.

At this point, it might be useful to further reflect for a moment on some of the implications of all the successive judgments passed in particular on African states in terms of 'state failure', usually accompanied by new rounds of admonitions as to how they should 'restructure' or go about their 'good governance'. The realities concerned, in Africa, but not only there, have indeed been sobering. But again, what exactly are notions like 'failing states' supposed to denote in donor parlance? What and whose criteria are at stake and how consistent are these criteria themselves? If 'failing states' and 'good governance' conceptually seem to relate to one another as chicken and egg, then was it 'failing states' which evoked new notions of 'good governance', or vice versa? More specifically, what role models for proper state performance have been implied by interventions such as the Structural Adjustment packages, aiming to make state agencies leaner and theoretically more effective, or by today's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, meant to produce increasingly detailed entries by which state policies are to be externally monitored?

The World Bank initiated 'good governance' agenda itself provides a good example, first, of how selected western-derived standards of governance were held up as a model to the South as to how they should go about their state restructuring, and second, how the use of this 'model' has nonetheless since been rapidly shifting. Initially serving as a set of criteria against which political conditionalities could be demanded (meaning: we will not give further loans or aid unless you follow our prescriptions for state restructuring), it was subsequently reformulated as a *selection* criteria for aid-deserving countries (meaning: you will first have to have 'good governance', or at least show you are moving in that direction, before we will consider your requests for aid). Evidently, the latter in principle left all those countries that fail in this respect or that cannot muster the energy to try and fit the criteria, to their own devices.

For all the concern with 'good governance' there has hardly been a donor saying: let us know whether you would like us to assist you in building up your state institutions *your way* and we will see what we can do, no con-

ditionalities attached. Such a posture might have begun to enable 'demanding' or 'requesting' countries to regain some sense of overall command and genuine ownership over their policy formulation and policy integration. It is this most vital aspect of any governance structure and process which has become seriously eroded due to the massive donor involvement in policy determination in many countries. Donors by and large have wanted to be in command, rather than be available on demand.

One question which thus arises is whether these interventions made 'failing states' more robust and better equipped to face up to the vagaries of today's global environment, or whether they may actually have deepened their fragility and failure. Notions of 'failure' of one kind or another appear to have laid at the basis of various successive interventions initiated in recent decades by World Bank, IMF and other global institutions - the 'good governance' agenda, SA and PRSPs in particular - , each time arguing that state failure of one kind or another called for new interventions and reform. It is difficult to avoid the impression however that each time the recipes concerned, rather than leading to any noticeable amelioration, were put aside after a while to make room for new rounds of diagnosis and directives. The state systems concerned appear to have been pushed into greater dependency on external (financial) support on the one hand, and with a weakening position vis-à-vis their own societies on the other. Some further in depth analysis of these successive waves of interaction between the identification of 'failing' state performance and global interventions, each time based on novel criteria and insights, would constitute a timely research project.

Different trajectories

While many state systems in Africa and other parts of the South have been seriously weakened as a result of external inroads, in a few cases they have moved from state 'failure' in one respect or another to full scale collapse. Such situations, in which all state functions come to grind down and result in potential or actual blank spaces emerging on the world's maps, have been basically unprecedented in modern history. Yet, we should not assume that there is a single 'recipe' for collapse, or a single path or set of determinants, calling in turn for a single set of responses. Short of, or beyond, the broader post-Cold War policy reversals leading to a substantially changing global context for viable statehood and prompting an increased incidence of state fragility and collapse, different political and economic constellations appear to have given rise to *different* trajectories to collapse. We should thus avoid *a priori* assumptions about the causes of state collapse except in terms of their pre-conditions.

The lifting of Cold War hegemonic 'support' structures should be primarily understood as implying that different social and political state systems - some of them more robust, others more fragile and vulnerable, yet each embedded within its own historically endowed socio-political and cultural context - were laid open to a whole range of political and economic forces and interests, internal and external. Such major reversals of global (pre-)conditions should therefore not be expected to promote or induce broadly parallel tracks. The particular patterns that might ensue would depend on such factors as the structuring of political forces, societal divisions, resource endowments and so on. In facing the forces of post-Cold War globalisation, state systems with different fault lines in their social or economic structures could thus exhibit notably contrasted patterns of fragmentation.

Appreciating such different contexts and trajectories is important also with an eye on assessing the appropriateness of external responses, or for understanding new conflicts arising out of conflicting scenarios for political rebuilding (Doornbos 2002). For instance, if the key problem in a given situation were identified as one of grossly malfunctioning institutions (as is often assumed), then presumably there would be a case for major internal institutional repair or overhaul - even though this might leave unattended the root causes of arbitrary rule, ethnic grievances or other conflicts that may have been responsible for the failing institutions in the first place. But if collapse has occurred or is threatening due to a state system's extreme vulnerability to changing externally driven economic conditions, then obviously the focus for remedial action should be shifted into different directions. Again, if a basic mismatch between a country's state framework and societal structure lies at the root of collapse, then it may well be more prudent to allow fresh departures to emerge out of that situation than insisting on re-instatement of the previous failing state structures or the maintenance of ex-colonial boundaries. In other words, the routes for remedial or preventive action may need to be just as different as the tracks leading to collapse. Mistakes in identifying the patterns of causality, and thus appropriate responses, may worsen already precarious situations.

Unsurprisingly, in recent years several instances of collapse have been followed by international calls for restoration of 'order', sanctions, or even advocacy of some form of international trusteeship for certain situations. To be sure, it is conceivable that some contexts may require a basic restoration of order and security to start with and might call for external actors playing a key role in that. In some situations of state fragmentation or collapse, especially if marked by profound stalemate between rival parties, there may simply be no alternative to some form of third party engagement, at the negotiating table or otherwise.

However, external actors should beware of rapid and overwhelming interventions which in turn would create new internal-external dichotomies. Internal actors as a matter of course must be allowed - and should themselves claim - a central role in any efforts at political reconstruction. Also, following state collapse, agonising re-appraisal of the nature of the (collapsed) state system in broadly representative fashion may need to run its course, and should be allowed the time it needs. As suggested above, if the key problem has been a lack of fit between political forces and societal structures then any straight-jacketing back into the previous state forms that failed should be avoided. In any such cases, a situation of statelessness lasting for some time should not by definition be viewed as problematic, but might allow much-needed re-appraisal of alternative structures, and futures.

Recognising different trajectories and their respective (potential) outcomes thus appears to be of the utmost importance when considering what responses, international or otherwise, would be most appropriate in a given situation. That message, however, does not always seem to be heeded. A recipe-thirsty international community rather appears inclined to search for readily available programmes of intervention, at times apparently irrespective of the factors that have led to actual crisis situations.

It is not difficult to understand how such inclinations may come about. While the international community considers it has a role to play in the redress of severe crisis with respect to particular countries, the time, interest and expertise to investigate how particular routes have actually led to collapse is often lacking. In the light of the perceived challenges of failing states and instances of state collapse, many multilateral and bilateral aid agencies have in recent years set up their own programs meant to respond to the complex political emergencies to which these may give rise. A common strategy is to try to be prepared for rapid and effective action. Significantly, these tendencies have acquired a dynamic of their own, and in their pursuit of effectiveness and co-ordinated action may paradoxically lead away from, rather than towards, developing capacities to design context-specific approaches. Moreover, external agendas and an interest in capturing the moment and bringing about fundamental change may enter the equation, irrespective of the dynamics that may have led to a given situation. As was noted in a GTZ report:

'[post]-conflict situations often provide special opportunities for political, legal, economic and administrative reforms to change past systems and structures which may have contributed to economic and social inequities and conflict...In the wake of conflict, donors should seize opportunities to help promote and maintain the momentum for reconciliation and needed reforms'. (Mehler and Ribaux in *Crisis Prevention and Conflict Management in Technical Co-operation*, 2000: 37)

On the donor front, several features deserve attention. One has been the tendency to search for common strategies, in part as a corrective to situations in which different external agencies were all doing their own thing, resulting in proverbial inter-agency confusion (Moore 1996). Through coordinated interventions, it is anticipated that effectiveness, strength, and impact can be optimised. Second and closely related there has been a tendency to work towards set recipes, which can be deployed at once and in all situations, again in response to perceived urgencies and demands of effectiveness (ibid.). Third, some authors and agencies are less inhibited about suggesting the need to sideline the 'sovereignty' of some of the affected countries, proposing to have it temporarily replaced through a UN or some other 'mandate' (for instance, Helman and Ratner 1992, Pfaff 1995). Fourth, there has been a trend among leading multilateral agencies to see post-conflict contexts as a suitable ground, and moment, to install market-friendly frameworks, thus seeing fresh starts as the moment for fresh designs of a particular kind. Thus, a Carnegie/UNHCR document authored by John Stremlau, after noting that it 'foresees the need for fundamental changes in the definition and defence of [the] principles of sovereign equality', went on to suggest that 'sustainable development based on legitimate combinations of market economics, democratic values and a healthy civil society can eventually provide the means for any nation to resolve internal conflicts peacefully and fairly' (Stremlau 1998: 2). A guiding hand was also offered by a new State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), tasked "to lead and coordinate U.S. Government planning, and institutionalize U.S. capacity, to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife so they can reach a sustainable path towards peace, democracy and a market economy." (West 2005: 30). Similar policy projections have increasingly been articulated in other official and semi-official statements. The trouble with many of such statements of intention to engage in external societal engineering, however, is that they give little indication as to what space they intend to grant to domestic actors.

Imagining Fresh Starts

So what could be done to reverse tendencies that block fresh openings and political re-starts, and allow constructive interactions on policy priorities in rehabilitation? First and foremost, there is a need to *de-generalise*, that is, for external actors and analysts to resist the temptation to overly generalise about causes of state collapse and their solutions. Instead, due attention should be given in analyses as well as in policy outlines to the implications of contrasted contexts, different dynamics and different trajectories that may continue to play crucial roles when trying to move from collapse to recovery. Responses should be context- and trajectory-sensitive, and must

not start out from a priori positions. Donor agencies should, in this light, refrain from investing too much time and energy in the generation of generalised policy responses and blueprints. Instead, they should consider collapse and re-start situations in more specific terms, beginning with a sound understanding of the trajectories that gave rise to them, and with an adaptive position as to what these might require in terms of redress or rehabilitation. Such a more receptive posture might also instil more modest ambitions among external actors with respect to the scope and capacity they have to influence processes of political reconstruction. With less programmatic orientations determining agency responses and actions, there might be greater chance of external actors concentrating on how they could best respond to demands arising from specific situations, developing a reactive rather than a pro-active stance.

Fresh start moments, almost by definition, are delicate. They may be full of promise and expectations of brighter futures, taking distance from the past. At the same time, they are extremely fragile, as the conflicts and violence that were inherent in the processes of breakdown and collapse will still be alive at least in the memory, and could conceivably be re-ignited. Fresh starts therefore need careful handling by all, and sound understandings of the circumstances that gave rise to them. External actors can have important roles to play at such moments, especially in advisory and moderating capacities geared towards consensus and confidence building among previously hostile parties. But they should be aware of the risks of complicating the process if they expect *their* designs for new political futures and structures to play a primary role.

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