

Accountability builds legitimate government

Strengthening local governance in post-conflict communities

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Strengthening the accountability of government officials to their constituents provides an important impetus to boosting their capacity to govern effectively. However, as examples from Iraq and Indonesia show, the legitimacy of the government is an important criterion for success.

One characteristic of fragile states is the existence of weak accountability loops between a government apparatus and its people. Overcoming such accountability gaps is one of the challenges in the process of achieving stability of the state. In this endeavour, efforts to develop the capacity of local governments are vital. This article looks at an example in Mosul, Iraq and another in the Moluccan islands in Indonesia.

Ideally, an effective state delivers public goods and services, provides an enabling environment for growth and ensures peace and security. In turn, an engaged society participates in public decision making and holds authorities accountable for their actions.

In post-conflict communities, these roles are severely constrained. The World Bank model illustrates the importance of strengthening the accountability links between an effective state (left), and an engaged society (right). Together they aim for peace and prosperity at the institutional level (top). The outcomes at the organisational level (middle) are a result of the processes at the human resource level (bottom).

Local government in Mosul, Iraq

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the government of the city of Mosul could no longer provide services because administrators had been fired and supplies looted. Local council members, appointed by the occupying forces, did not have the capacity to govern and had little political will to engage with each other.

Most international efforts focused on boosting local governance. Local power brokers, who were suddenly appointed to positions of official authority, were invited to prioritise foreign assistance

programmes in specific sectors, such as education, health or transport. Without bureaucratic training and supporting institutions, however, they mostly failed to provide coherent government services. They had little support from foreign organisations, which employed many humanitarian assistance personnel with little development experience. State effectiveness was hampered by political instability, constant battling in the governing councils and violence across the country. Local officials were replaced in rapid succession. Brief spurts of progress were followed by constant setbacks.

As a result of the limited capacity and the abrupt process by which authority had been established, the new government did not have legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. It was thus necessary to create accountability links between state and citizens. Public awareness campaigns were initiated whereby the public was invited to step forward and engage in civic matters. Before the invasion this had been a risky activity monitored by the state police. Now, education and dissemination of information about the core concepts of democracy started to generate interest in public decision making. Officials were challenged to justify their policies, and they quickly proved either capable or illegitimate. Unfortunately, given the continued unrest across the country, many ineffective officials were not replaced, but were kept in power to support short-term stability objectives.

The Moluccan islands

Meanwhile, in 2003 the Moluccan islands in eastern Indonesia were just recovering from five years of inter-religious violence. The security situation was much better than in Iraq. Here, UNDP supported a project of Mercy Corps, an American NGO, to bring together Christian and Muslim communities for the first time since the violence erupted. After assessing the networks, norms, and trust levels in both communities and running several successful workshops to reconcile the former antagonists, work with local authorities began.

After years of centralised governance, local government (at district and provincial levels) had lost its legitimacy. In order to address this credibility issue, Mercy Corps' peace building project organised workshops that brought together groups of local government officials with activists from their constituencies. Possibly for the first time ever, civil society organisations were able to present their concerns to government officials in a safe and constructive space. At the same time, the authorities were able to admit their shortcomings and reach out for cooperation with civil society and the international organisations. Step by step, starting from an acknowledged common ground at the human resource level, and in line with the World Bank model (see box), the local government officials and their constituents started to communicate, leading to the gradual development of organisational capacity. Holding those in power accountable is a considerable challenge in post-conflict communities, particularly in countries with a history of authoritarian styles of governance. The key is to strengthen the accountability links between the state and society and support the demands for legitimate and capable people in office.

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