EUI ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE

POLICY BRIEF

External interventions, local realities: What can we learn from lessons (not) learned

This policy brief reflects on the role of knowledge and expertise in external interventions, as a follow-up to the workshop 'Rethinking global knowledge production of "the local": The role of political anthropology in international intervention', held at the EUI on 20 and 21 June 2022. During the workshop, researchers from different academic disciplines (anthropology, International Relations, and political sciences) working on different geographical areas discussed what the notion of 'intervention' means in competing environments with diverse sets of interests, actors and uncertainties. The workshop asked why, despite collective calls for and public commitment to the principles of 'participation', 'local ownership', and 'lessons learned', interventions often continue to pursue rigid forms of order and stability that feed displacement, uprooting, and grievances rather than redress them. The panels revolved around the different steps through which interventions are thought through, designed, implemented, challenged, and re-assessed in the long-term. This policy brief condenses the outcomes of these panels by referring to three main domains, namely: security interventions, development and humanitarianism, and peace- and state-building.

External interventions have a questionable track record, particularly in regions where poverty and insecurity are accompanied by environmental stress and state fragility. The consequences of such interventions have often affected communities in disturbing ways, by reinforcing their vulnerabilities

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rather than improving them. These interventions take place under different labels: development, humanitarian aid, security, governance and institution-building, where complex technical, military and political objectives interact in a competitive space characterised by asymmetric dimensions of 'global' and 'local'. This policy brief addresses these critical interfaces, where differing knowledge domains, economic interests, and political agendas might be in conflict.

Interventions that aim to bring about stability and development to local societies have become common practice, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, when externally sponsored interventions evolved and expanded. We have conceptualised interventions into three categories: military intervention, humanitarian aid and longer-term development, and governance programs. Each of these categories involve different sets of logic and repertoires. Actors from each category use their own frameworks of knowledge to implement their mandates with the self-perception that they operate in a depoliticised playground, where they undertake 'neutral', 'technical', and 'morally-led' missions. There is an acknowledged lack of coordination and compatibility among these different domains. As a response, this policy brief highlights the challenges generated by competing visions of 'the local', including the knowledge production, interests and agendas of relevant actors. Paradigm shifts have also taken place; from state building to stabilisation, development interventions now increasingly adopt humanitarian approaches, and the security-development nexus has become a topic of heated debate which incorporates agendas of sustainability and resilience.

Security interventions

While the extensive African droughts of the 1970s and 1980s brought climate and food security crises to the top of the agenda, from the 1990s onwards, interventions have refocused on civil wars and human rights violations, which have been widely regarded as threats to global peace. State- and peace-building interventions that focused on reconstructing war-torn societies were modelled on Western liberal democracies and were coupled with development policies in line with the Washington consensus (for example, structural adjustment programs, privatisation, decentralisation, and 'good governance'). Since 2001, the Global War on Terror provided the justification for new momentum in Western military interventionism, from Afghanistan to Iraq, and from Somalia to the Sahel. However, as a response to reoccurring failures, these military engagements were gradually replaced by a 'post-liberal' form of intervention, in which more narrow stabilisation programmes and 'technical' capacity building largely took the place of a moral agenda that promoted good governance.

The abovementioned approaches conceptualise states where intervention is considered necessary, as 'failed' or 'weak'. It is this 'weakness' and 'failure' of the state that creates conditions favourable to international terrorist networks. As a result, both forms of intervention tend to 'de-politicize' knowledge production and power relations to mere technical aspects, so as to decouple insurgency, food security, and social securities from local dynamics and grievances. Accordingly, the solution is to reinforce the state sovereignty and build effective security forces to tackle the related global security threats, including army training and the strengthening of state bureaucracies. The experience of the 'War on Terror' is illustrative in this respect, as from its early conception of pure counterterrorism, this military campaign eventually developed into a wider counter-insurgency effort, coupled with the engagement of the local context through a policy of development and institution building. However, after initial military successes (defeat of the Taliban in 2001, death of Bin Laden in

2011, re-conquest of Timbuktu and Kidal in Mali in January 2013, destruction of ISIS in 2017) none of these structural interventions have been able to fully eradicate local insurgent groups, and even less to establish stable, long-term, legitimate states. Instead, following these interventions, we observe a general trend of more coercive and less legitimate states, increasingly challenged by transnational militant actors and propped up by external forces acting in 'supporting' roles.

Military interventions take place in the short term and often as the response to security related emergencies, with mandates to restore 'stability' as rapidly as possible. Interventions like those in Afghanistan in 2001, in Libya in 2011, and in Mali in 2013 target an enemy with whom negotiations are deemed impossible or inappropriate. This type of intervention is not designed with a long-term perspective in mind and involves a frequent turnover of military units and personnel, who are not trained to understand local society. Military officers rely heavily on local translators and middlemen, and relations with social scientists are either inexistent or superficial (and sometimes even antagonistic). Even after national armies have been trained, intervening states typically prefer to retain direct management of military operations to other external actors. This is due to a lack of trust in the local national military, or simply because of discrepancies in training, readiness for combat, and equipment. Accordingly, we observe a broad disregard for 'local' knowledge (for example, local history, genealogies, socio-cultural relations, or economic structures), as this knowledge is not considered necessary for success. External interventions are framed in language that is either dominated by a normative agenda, simplistic (for example, 'killing the bad guys'), or highly technical (for example, 'neutralising terrorists'). By and large, this approach does not permit constructive or critical reflection.

Development and Humanitarianism

There is consensus among Western intervening states that lasting peace depends on a policy of assistance to development in order to support local livelihoods and prevent local populations from joining the 'bad guys'. International agencies and NGOs often operate parallel to military and diplomatic actors. Despite their evident socio-political implications, such interventions are often deemed to be purely 'technical', informed by forms of knowledge and beliefs that evolution is a linear, progressive process, moving from a 'critical' stage to a 'developed' one, rather than a political project or a consequence of ongoing power-negotiations. Crises are assessed through external views, and development aid is pursued by pragmatically following pre-established instructions, not necessarily tailored to the local context, becoming in fact a self-realizing process.

These interventions work at a micro, local level with short- to medium-term perspectives. The involved organizations are divided by their different expertises, and each one concentrates on its specific fields of competence: education, health, water, agriculture, livelihood support, women's empowerment, or managing the impact of environmental dynamics, food crises or conflict. In most cases, including in the work of the EU, these interventions are implemented by different, specialized agencies. Repeated calls for coordination along the humanitarian-development nexus have not (yet) produced an extensively integrated approach.

The implications of these inconsistencies are clear when observing interactions on the ground. Expatriate personnel rely extensively on fixers and translators ('international locals'), and foreign agencies may also subcontract part of their job to local organizations. In turn, these local actors have their own agendas, which may not necessarily be consistent with that of their employers, such as favouring their networks and supporting their own constituencies through a partisan implementation of the programme. Knowledge of local societies is often presented

by these intermediaries, who are 'bilingual': they know the requirements of foreign agencies (that is, how to write a report and comply with formal procedure and customs), and they know the expectations of the population and the interests of the local elite. The significant role of such intermediaries renders the process of 'translating' the context to foreign interveners a matter of local political economy. That local actors have and display their own interests should not surprise anyone, however, in a paradigm where humanitarian and development interventions are framed as purely technical practices, this awareness is foreclosed.

Peace and State building

When the 'problem' is weak states, the 'solution' is then to build strong states. Here the objective is to put in place a relatively efficient institutional structure aimed to ensure long-term security and development. The export of such a liberal state paradigm emphasizes building institutions, setting governance patterns, and training civil servants. This process is often led by foreign diplomats and experts who rarely have any knowledge of the country but serve as custodians of expertise based on 'best practices', and who travel from one country to another with conceptual frameworks of standardised 'good governance' or 'democracy' models. Again, these models are conceived of as merely technical evolutions and consequential outcomes of self-realizing processes, where the progress towards political stability is seen as a linear process, which would in the longer-term iron out local discrepancies and uncertainties.

The use of surveys and statistics of 'local conditions' may adapt the model to the context, or be used to justify the intervention; but there is rarely any genuine interest in calling on social scientists to carry out such methods. International experts, who make their careers by working on different countries and often by using a fit-for-all model of development, assume that 'good governance' is also the objective of their trainees. While state builders would work with a long-term perspective, the expectation is that external interventions should, at a certain point, be defined as either a success or failure. Consequently, when interveners abandon the ambitious state-building enterprise in favour of a more flexible processes, the temporal dimension is enlarged and made open-ended. With vague objectives and no exit strategy in place, interventions can, in theory, carry on indefinitely.

While the term 'resilience' has emerged as the new agenda (just a buzzword for some), there is an essentially porous understanding of when a society is 'ready' to stand on its own feet without external 'assistance', which combines with a continuous assumption of local vulnerabilities. The view of the local is, therefore, characterized by the suspicion that it is always perceived as in the need for constant intervention and assistance, linking the local and global together in new and problematic ways (for example, legitimising unbalanced power-relations).

Conflicting intervention expertise and agendas

The diverse domains and actors - military and security experts, development and humanitarian practitioners, diplomats and international policy specialists - mobilize very different kinds of knowledge, beliefs, and expertise and operate through parallel and at times divergent interventions. While coordination is often deemed desirable, we frequently observe that each international agency attaches itself to a specific 'local partner', providing a specific reading of needs and problems, and carving out their 'niche' in the busy space of intervention.

Military and security actors avoid perceiving themselves as neo-colonial because they do not want to be associated with the postcolonial continuum. While this clashes with local perceptions (for example, the recent anti-French protests in Sahelian countries), it also hampers the reading of potentially insightful postcolonial literatures and analyses, including those of social anthropologists, which could serve the strategies and activities of intervention forces. Intervening armies offer very limited training on local knowledge to their officers (linguistic

training is an exception to this) because of the rapid turnover of staff, and due to the officers' perception of their task: their mandate is purely military, and their targets are terrorists and other security actors. Consequently, intervention forces explicitly do not seek out anthropological knowledge, which presupposes an understanding of the events as political interactions and negotiations among all actors, located across the local-global scale.

Diplomats and international policy experts often have scarce and selective knowledge of the local societies they work in, mostly because they do not believe they need it. Arguably, these actors come with a superior, 'global' expertise that is thought to work everywhere with only minor adjustments to fit local contexts. Development, peace and state stability are objective items that materialise, more or less, in very similar ways across the globe, once local nuances are ironed out. Engagement with local policymaking needs to serve this purpose, without too much questioning of the interests and tensions underpinning local insecurities and fragilities.

Humanitarian and development actors may engage with local knowledge, but they often have a single-issue agenda, within a limited vision of the broader local society. Though operating in the framework of a global agenda of development, international agencies and NGOs tend to bypass the local state apparatus when it exists, and often consider it as an obstacle to their autonomy of action, rather than as a target, or a partner, of their interventions. Moreover, by paying their employees above average wages, they contribute to internal brain-drain and de-legitimation of the civil service. By directly delivering goods, training and services, they not only make the state appear useless, but also remove the dimension of the state as a provider of social welfare. This, in turn, may contribute to undermining the legitimacy of the state, especially considering the enhanced coercive capacity induced by military actors as described above. In other words, states that are only able to deliver on security but not on primary service provision are likely to be seen as the problem rather than the solution by local society.

Overall, we have identified three problems surrounding external interventions and the consideration of the local context:

1. The need for cooperation is conceived of as a technical problem of replication rather than as a political problem. Rarely do different intervention actors cooperate to conceptualize the 'problem' to be addressed, nor to understand why certain 'solutions' might be contradictory.

2. Interveners in security, development and institutional building engage in direct competition with each other, with contradictory timing and organisational agendas. This competition is easily exploited by local elites with parochial interests. By ignoring local knowledge and the underpinning political economy, processes of intervention are characterised by competing local actors who define the rules of the game and are able to play on a dual register.

3. The lack of 'knowledge of the local' is not just a problem of implementation in interventions; it entangles the local and the global in ways that are part of a persistent colonial playbook of domination.

Concluding remarks

Any approach, either critical or constructive, should ensure that the following elements are taken into consideration:

- All external interventions occur in local arenas that are already crowded with controversial and competing interests and capacities.
- Interventions should thus not be conceived of as sequences of linear, technical steps to follow, nor as ‘technical’ or ‘moral’ missions, but rather, as political projects.
- As political projects, interventions have long-term consequences.
- These consequences, including growing in-equalities, casualties and grievances, are borne by local populations.
- A thorough analysis of existing socio-cultural patterns, the historical trajectory of a place, and dynamics of local political economies should inform any external intervention.
- Intervention strategies and agendas should be kept flexible enough to adapt to improved understandings, to shifting conditions, and to the evolving uncertainties that characterise local contexts.

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PASTRES

PASTRES (Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Resilience: Global Lessons from the Margins) is a research programme that aims to learn from pastoralists about responding to uncertainty and resilience, with lessons for global challenges. PASTRES is funded by an ERC (European Research Council) Advanced Grant starting in 2018, and running for five years. The project is hosted by the ESRC STEPS Centre at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and the European University Institute in Florence. It is led by Prof Ian Scoones (STEPS/IDS) and Dr Michele Nori (EUI), with supervision support from Dr Jeremy Lind (IDS).

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