Three things SLRC teaches us about supporting a shift from fragility to resilience

Summary

For international engagement in settings affected by conflict and fragility, three themes emerge prominently from ten years of SLRC research. We need to improve our understanding of:

- the complex risks for people who live in situations affected by violent conflict
- the strength and type of coping capacities
- how state legitimacy is constructed.

All three have direct implications for donors and implementing partners who are attempting in one way or another to address fragility. They require a commitment to:

- conduct more complex risk assessments
- recognise and support existing coping capacities
- use the process of supporting state legitimacy also to strengthen resilience.

Together, these insights and their implications form part of an urgently needed paradigm shift that takes international engagement from an emphasis on good governance towards a paradigm best described as 'fragility-to-resilience' (Ingram and Papoulidis 2018; OECD 2020).

DFID/Russell Watkins. A doctor with the International Medical Corps examines a patient at a clinic in Pakistan.

Three things SLRC teaches us about supporting a shift from fragility to resilience

Introduction

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, a staggering 80% of the world's people classified as 'extremely poor' were estimated to live in a context characterised as fragile by 2030 (OECD 2018). The UN reports that fragile contexts are the most vulnerable to Covid-19's indirect consequences, including famine, violent conflict, forced displacement and other health crises (United Nations Secretary-General 2020).

Fragility is a contested concept, and how to address it is the subject of much discussion and poses tremendous practical challenges (Nwajiaku-Dahou *et al.* 2020). The OECD has redefined fragility as a combination of higher risks and lower coping capacities of states, systems and communities to manage risks at political, societal, economic, environmental and societal levels (OECD 2020). This aligns with recent insights that, despite popular misconceptions, Western countries' historic exits from fragility were not the result of accelerated periods of growth, but of better management of (and thus resilience towards) major crises and setbacks (World Bank Group 2017). For development practice, these insights clarify that escapes from fragility are the work of generations and that transitions are not linear.

Supporting resilience in these non-linear transitions requires managing risks, strengthening coping capacities, and understanding the role of state legitimacy and political settlements in determining societal fragility or resilience. Research from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) can help articulate how the development community might move towards supporting such non-linear transitions and societal resilience.

Crucial SLRC insights for development practice

SLRC research speaks to three challenges that highlight crucial shifts needed in international engagement in situations of past or ongoing fragility and violence.

The role of conflict and other shocks
External actors often assume that the lived experience and impact of violent conflict is the most important factor in determining the ongoing fragility of post-conflict communities. Yet, SLRC research findings show that, in the aftermath of war, the most outsized risks to peoples' lives and livelihoods are disasters and disease outbreaks – not conflict and instability (SLRC 2017). The common assumption that fragility is synonymous with conflict, and that stability is a precondition for addressing wider societal risks creates a key barrier to focusing on complex, interacting risks. At present, most financing for disaster risk reduction bypasses fragile states (Peters 2017). Aid interventions that do focus on risks typically see them as 'single-hazards' – depending on organisational focus across the humanitarian, peace and development nexus – not as complex risks that interact and compound to deepen fragility traps (Opitz-Stapleton *et al.* 2019).

Coping capacities
Aid in fragile states is often delivered as short-term, one-off projects and scattered technical assistance based on external best practices, with little attention to the coping capacities of states and societies (Ingram and Papoulidis, 2018). SLRC research has included essential work documenting the diverse, often externally invisible, coping capacities of populations dealing with recurring shocks and long-term stress. This includes identifying what people do to keep from utter destitution; these activities are often an untenable mix of migration, casual labour, borrowing, petty trade and agricultural work (Gunasekara 2020). Helping crisis-affected populations to move away from such last-resort measures by improving their livelihoods and other coping capacities, including through safety nets where appropriate, is critical for building societal resilience. However, in current practice, donors and implementers often propose well-intentioned solutions for economic growth that fail to recognise or support positive livelihood strategies and the capacities on which they are built, thereby eroding resilience.

For example, SLRC highlights the issues with donor-driven support for growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) during Sri Lanka's post-conflict recovery efforts. Struggling people were holding down multiple jobs to deal with scarcity and could not take on roles in SMEs that required competition, specialisation and innovation for a single low wage (Lokuge et al. 2019). More broadly, SLRC has documented large-scale coping capacities, like Afghanistan's moral economy, a sophisticated and historic form of long-term loans with low interest between neighbours that provide urgent cash and preserve social bonds, being sustained by religious commitments (Shaw and Ghafoori 2019). While donor aid should complement these capacities, SLRC research highlights several cases in which donor good-governance agendas and neoliberal policies have strained these coping capacities of populations. These include pushing for lower welfare subsidies in Sri Lanka, and constraining migration in Afghanistan, a key to households' capacity to borrow (Gunasekara *et al.* 2019; Shaw and Ghafoori 2019).

Understanding how state legitimacy works
SLRC's most cited and pioneering work has been to debunk the aid community's assumption that basic service delivery in fragile contexts automatically boosts positive perceptions of government, thereby strengthening state legitimacy (Cummings and Paudel 2019; Godamunne 2016, 2017; Gunasekara *et al.* 2019; Jackson and Nemat 2018; McCullough *et al.* 2019; Nixon and Mallett 2017). This assumption – that legitimacy can be strengthened via a simple transaction – continues to permeate stabilisation, peacebuilding and development approaches (McCullough 2020).

A profound insight of this research from several locations is that the state legitimates its actions through a 'legitimising narrative' that helps to shape what different groups expect from the state and the criteria they use to judge the state's

legitimacy (McCullough and Papoulidis 2020; McCullough *et al.* 2019). In that sense, legitimacy is co-constructed in an interaction between the state and citizens who deem the state legitimate only when it delivers services and functions in line with this constructed identity and expectations.

State legitimisation narrative and strategies on behalf of the state often target core constituencies within a political settlement that the state needs to accommodate or co-opt to remain in power (McCullough *et al.* 2019). Groups without disruptive power may be marginalised from social protection, jobs and services, increasing their vulnerability, and lowering their coping capacities to deal with shocks and crises. Groups that cannot be co-opted may be actively and violently repressed by the state, fuelling conflict, or locking structural exclusion into the political settlement – compromising both state and societal resilience.

Implications for donors and practitioners

SLRC findings on complex risks, coping capacities and the co-construction of state legitimacy have significant practical implications for peace, stabilisation and development activities within a fragility and resilience agenda.

Remove the conflict lens to recognise complex risks

The finding that conflict is not the only – and often not even the major – risk to people's livelihoods in the aftermath of war needs to inform a paradigm shift in international engagement. Until recently, such engagement was driven by the paradigm of good governance, with the aim to promote Western institutions and best practices for economic growth and poverty reduction. This is the logic that underpinned the Millennium Development Goals, but which paid no attention to complex risks that can disrupt peace and development in fragile states. The rise of resilience initiatives in development is promising but such initiatives have been traditionally siloed into the sectors of food security, climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction (Ingram and Papoulidis, 2018). These siloes do a disservice to people as they prevent a country-wide focus on risks (and causes) of shocks and stress and how to manage them in a holistic way.

Strengthen coping capacities

In capturing the diverse coping capacities across fragile contexts in Africa and Asia, SRLC has made visible the political and social underpinnings of systems, institutions and markets that are often under-examined in development practice. Any formal safety nets and external interventions should complement capacities without undermining them. Increasing the visibility of these capacities, and examining them further, is indispensable to informing the growing number of resilience assessments and strategies of the World Bank, OECD, UN and EU.

Use insights on legitimising narratives for state legitimacy to strengthen resilience

SLRC's research reveals the considerable influence of donor and multilateral ideas and assumptions in trying to influence a state's legitimacy, while highlighting the ways in which this understanding is too simplistically focused on the transaction and does not reflect how state legitimacy is constructed (McCullough *et al.* 2020). Development actors need to reimagine approaches to supporting resilient political settlements in ways that avoid simplistic reductions of 'service delivery for state legitimacy'. Instead, international engagement must be designed with an understanding of how legitimising narratives help to settle or undermine political settlements, using this understanding to help shape more progressive state narratives, norms and institutions for peace, coupled with more inclusive and durable distributions of services and resources to support the most vulnerable (Cummings and Paudel 2019; Godamunne 2019; McCullough *et al.* 2019).

An emerging paradigm for international engagement in contexts marked by fragility

Taken together, these three implications for international engagement form part of a paradigm shift for international engagement in fragile contexts. The emerging paradigm of 'fragility to resilience' – with attention to complex risks, coping capacities and how state legitimacy can be used to strengthen resilience – has significant promise in overcoming the problems of good governance models and improving support for country exits from fragility.

Author: Jonathan Papoulidis

Jonathan Papoulidis is World Vision's Executive Advisor on Fragile States and
an inaugural Fellow at Columbia World Projects, Columbia University.

References

Cummings, C. and Paudel, S.B. (2019). 'Services and legitimacy: exploring everyday experiences of the state in Nepal's Terai region'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Godamunne, N. (2016). 'Can social protection build state legitimacy? Perspectives from post war Sri Lanka'. *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 4(11), 703–717.

Godamunne, N. (2017). 'Delivering services during crisis: social protection provision and state legitimacy in post-war Sri Lanka'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Godamunne, N. (2019). 'How did social welfare provision (de-)legitimise the post-colonial state in Sri Lanka?' London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Gunasekara, V. (2020). 'Paradoxes in livelihood interventions: a synthesis of evidence from selected war-affected areas in Africa and Asia'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium/ODI.

Gunasekara, V., Surenthiraraj, R. and Tilakaratne, P. (2019). *Services and legitimacy: Exploring the everyday experiences of the state in Sri Lanka*. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Ingram, G. and Papoulidis, J. (2018) (8 November). 'Fragile states and the search for "what works"'. Brookings Institution. Available at: www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/11/08/fragile-states-and-the-search-for-what-works/.

Jackson, A. and Nemat, O. (2018). 'Politics over evidence: questioning the link between service delivery and state legitimacy in Afghanistan'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Lokuge, G., Senn, A. and Ranawana, A. (2019). 'Policy dissonance in enterprise development programming in Sri Lanka'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

McCullough, A. (2020). 'Five common assumptions aid programmes make in supporting state legitimacy'. Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Available at: https://securelivelihoods.org/5-common-assumptions/.

McCullough, A. and Papoulidis, J. (2020) (28 January 28). 'Why we need to rethink our understanding of state legitimacy to address fragility'. World Bank. Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/why-we-need-rethink-our-understanding-state-legitimacy-address-fragility.

McCullough, A., Toru, S., Syed, R. and Ahmed, S. (2019). 'Why services won't always buy legitimacy: everyday experiences of the state in Swat, Pakistan'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

McCullough, A., Lacroix, A. and Hennessey, G. (2020). 'Reconstructing our understanding of the link between services and state legitimacy'. Working Paper 87. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium/ODI.

Nixon, H. and Mallett, R. (2017). 'Service delivery, public perceptions and state legitimacy: findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Nwajiaku-Dahou, K., El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, S. and Rocha Menocal, A. (2020) (13 October). 'Fragility: time for a rethink'. Overseas Development InComment. Available at: https://www.odi.org/blogs/17432-fragility-time-rethink.

OECD (2018). *States of Fragility 2018*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD (2020). *States of Fragility 2020*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Opitz-Stapleton, S., Nadin, R., Kellett, J., Calderone, M., Quevedo, A., Peters, K. and Mayhew, L. (2019). 'Risk-informed development: from crisis to resilience'. London: ODI.

Peters, K. (2017). 'The next frontier for disaster risk reduction: tackling disasters in fragile and conflict-affected contexts'. London: ODI.

Shaw, T. and Ghafoori, I. (2019). 'On borrowed time: the limits of informal credit for livelihood security in Herat, Afghanistan'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

SLRC (2017). 'How to support state-building, service delivery and recovery in fragile and conflict-affected situations: lessons from six years of SLRC research'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

United Nations Secretary-General (2020) (2 September). 'As COVID-19 fuels conflict, threatens international security, global unity to fight terrorism needed more than ever, Secretary-General Tells Aqaba Process Meeting' (SG/SM/20227). UN Secretary-General. New York, NY: UN.

World Bank Group (2017). *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law*. Washington, DC: World Bank.