

Chapter 1

Statebuilding in fragile contexts: key terms and concepts

This chapter defines the key terms and concepts that are used in this publication, and examines contemporary understanding of the state, the internal process of statebuilding, and the qualities that define fragile and resilient states.

Contemporary understandings of the state

States are the principal institutional and organisational units that exercise political and public authority in modern times. In theory – and in a growing number of countries – they embody the organisational framework and the accepted, stable set of institutions that regulate political, social and economic engagement across a territorially bounded area. But in reality states do not all look alike, nor are they organised around the same principles, laws or norms. Crucially, the degree to which they are embedded in legitimate and enduring state-society relations varies substantially.

The definition of the state has a long-standing history. There are definitions that highlight the authority, institutional presence (through law and order) and territorial boundaries of the state (Weber, 1968). Others focus on the “infrastructural power” of the state, underlining the effectiveness with which key functions are fulfilled and services provided (Mann, 1984). Finally, there are definitions that centre on locating the state in society, paying close attention to the web of state-society relations defining how the nexus between social expectations and state capacity is mediated; how political power is exercised; and how service provision and resource allocation are determined (Migdal, 2001). The conceptual thinking in the development partner community has evolved towards the latter, in highlighting the centrality of state-society relations for understanding what makes states resilient and enduring.

The institutional dimensions of states vary considerably but what has become fixed over time, with the consolidation of an international system since 1945 premised around state sovereignty, is the territorial sanctity of state boundaries. Thus, irrespective of what else states do, how they are structured and organised, or the manner in which states connect and interact with the societies they govern, their physical boundaries have become relatively immutable. Any attempt to modify these boundaries inevitably creates conflictual situations.

Defining statebuilding

Statebuilding has been defined in the OECD DAC Initial Finding Paper as “an endogenous process to enhance capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state driven by state-society relations” (OECD, 2008d). The process must be understood against a background of long-term historical and structural factors that contribute to shaping the contours of state formation and the nature of state-society relations. And it must be understood within the exigencies of current circumstances in the country concerned. These may include, for example, the risk of conflict or effects of previous conflict either internally or in the region, or the impact of economic pressures generated by global recession, debt, limited trade opportunities, financial imbalances and commodity prices.

It is axiomatic that statebuilding is primarily a domestic process that involves local actors, which means that the role of international actors is necessarily limited. But the community of development partners, and their governments more broadly, can contribute to supporting and facilitating the political and institutional processes that can strengthen the foundations of a resilient state and society.

Statebuilding is especially challenging when it takes place in conflict-affected environments, including post-conflict situations – places where criminal or other forms of violence are prevalent or where the threat of violent conflict looms (*e.g.* where the spillover effects of armed conflict in a neighbouring state create tension and uncertainty). This highlights the importance of understanding the connection between the challenges and tasks of statebuilding and those of peacebuilding (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1. Linkages between peacebuilding and statebuilding

Although most peacebuilding focuses on the transition from war to peace, the concept and the practices of peacebuilding are in principle about supporting sustainable peace regardless of whether or not political conflicts have recently produced violence. Peacebuilding is undertaken because violent conflict is looming, ongoing or recently over.

The emerging UN consensus is that peacebuilding “involves a range of measures aimed at reducing the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict, by strengthening national capacities for conflict management and laying the foundations for sustainable peace. It is a complex, long-term process aimed at creating the necessary conditions for positive and sustainable peace by addressing the deep-rooted structural causes of violent conflict in a comprehensive manner. Peace-building measures address core issues that affect the functioning of society and the state” (UNDPKO, 2008). This indicates a preventive as well as a post-conflict role for the concept and practice of peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding and statebuilding therefore emerge as interrelated processes, addressing similar underlying problems and a common overall purpose. The ultimate objectives of both are fundamentally consistent (Grävingholt, Gänzle and Ziaja, 2009). Statebuilding and peacebuilding both aim to help societies move in directions that are conducive to sustained development; both are aimed at supporting capable, legitimate and responsive states characterised by peaceful relations among communities and with neighbours, in which power is contested non-violently (Sisk and Wyeth, 2009). While a peacebuilding and statebuilding perspective may emphasise different areas of engagement or approaches, the potential for synergy between the two processes is clear.

If international support to peacebuilding and statebuilding is to be successfully integrated, peacebuilding approaches need to be more sensitive to longer-term concerns of state legitimacy and capacity. Similarly, there is a need to understand how statebuilding activities will impact drivers of peace and conflict, and to ensure that the causes and drivers of conflict are addressed and managed as part of the statebuilding process.

State fragility and resilience

A **fragile state** has weak capacity to carry out basic functions of governing a population and its territory, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society. As a consequence, trust and mutual obligations between the state and its citizens have become weak.

In fragile states, authority will often flow from a limited number of social groups or interests reflecting an exclusive political settlement that represents a narrowly based coalition or set of interests. Rather than resolving conflict among a broad range of social groups, conflict or difference is often used as justification for strong repressive institutions and limited forums for debate or discussion. Fragile states are also more vulnerable to (internal and external) shocks and the effects of climate change, natural disasters and regional or international economic crisis.¹

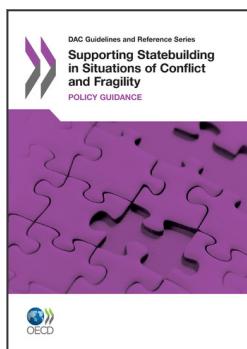
More **resilient states**, in contrast, are capable of absorbing shocks and transforming and channelling radical change or challenges while maintaining political stability and preventing violence. Resilient states exhibit the capacity and legitimacy of governing a population and its territory. They can manage and adapt to changing social needs and expectations, shifts in elite and other political agreements, and growing institutional complexity. Resilience increases when expectations, institutions, and the political settlement interact in ways that are mutually reinforcing.

Fragility and resilience are neither fixed nor immutable, but rather should be seen as shifting points along a spectrum. Fragility and resilience are the consequences of factors that range from the structural, the historical, and the global, to very short-term events. Fragility and resilience are not necessarily temporary or chronic. These conditions – whether the product of particular government policies and practices over the course of a few years, for example, or arising from more entrenched and systemic patterns of how power is distributed and exercised in a society – can be altered, for better or for worse.

The overall goal for the international community is to support and enable the emergence of states that *(i)* are capable, accountable and responsive, and *(ii)* are rooted in an ongoing nonviolent and robust exchange with society about the distribution of political power and economic resources and the adaptation of society and institutions. External actors need to acknowledge that the ideal end-“state” they aim for is but a distant prospect in many circumstances. However, movement along the spectrum from fragility towards resilience is a realistic expectation if the right policies are put in place, along with adequate resources. A key starting point needs to be a measure of realism about what international actors can achieve, within a country and globally at any given moment in time.

Note

1. All states face a variety of challenges; the precise make-up of these challenges depends on the state’s location, its history, its wealth and its governance. Some of the challenges result from exogenous shocks or global power struggles. They may arise from economic sources, such as the recent global recession; or from the sharp rise in food and energy prices that preceded it; or from political factors such as war in neighbouring territories. They may also emanate from natural disasters. More frequent and deepening challenges are anticipated as the consequences of climate change unfold.



From:
**Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict
and Fragility**
Policy Guidance

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264074989-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2011), “Statebuilding in fragile contexts: key terms and concepts”, in *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264074989-5-en>

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