

# Interventions in Contexts of Armed Conflict: Under What Conditions Can Development Help Stabilize Spaces Plagued by Violence?

## Policy Brief

### Key points:

- Recent experience shows that development projects must avoid various pitfalls when working to stabilize conflict zones.
- Mediation, reintegration, and negotiation projects must not neglect political motivations or the impacts of solidarity amongst factions.
- Actions conducted locally must be integrated into a national program, to avoid any political and social fragmentation of the territory.
- Stabilization of violent areas requires consolidation of the central government bodies that manage the socio-political order. They should not be substituted with donors.

Most contemporary interventions in countries in conflict implement so-called stabilization strategies. By linking humanitarian and development institutions to military operations, these strategies seek to consolidate control of local areas and deliver services to people during or after the military offensive phase. However, the experience of interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel has clearly shown the difficulty of reconciling short-term military priorities with development or social engineering policies, which require a long timeframe by nature. Against this backdrop, three crucial issues highlighted by recent studies<sup>[1]</sup>, should be pointed out. First, political motivations and collective mutual support amongst factions must be taken into account when developing mediation, reintegration, and negotiation policies. Second, actions implemented on a local scale are effective only if they are mainstreamed into a national program, so that political and social fragmentation of the territory is avoided. Third, stabilization of violent spaces is not possible without bolstering the central government bodies that manage the socio-political order. External actors must support the central government's coordination capacity so as to avoid the perverse effects of a massive intervention.

[1] This Policy Brief summarizes the « Observatoire des conflits contemporains » webinar series organized by the Agence Française de Développement on the "Social Dynamics of Civil Wars" project of Gilles Dorronsoro, Professor of Political Science at Université de Paris I, along with participation by numerous specialists in armed conflicts.

### The illusion of local-level action in Afghanistan

*"International operators (...) systematically put priority on the local level when determining military and civilian policies, under the illusion that communities have capacity for self-government. (...) But this approach is doomed to repeated failure due to the circulation of people and ideas, in Afghanistan and within the broader contexts of migration and religious networks. For example, far from being isolated, the valleys of Kunar and Kapisa provinces are above all gateways to Pakistan (...) Considering the local level as a natural category amounts to associating it with permanence and stability. Yet, everything indicates that identities and solidarities have transformed rapidly, due to the changes sustained by Afghan society over several decades (...) Furthermore, individuals who share a physical space do not necessarily form a group capable of collective action. (...) Many villages are home to distinct groups that work together on a minimal scale; the presence of several mosques is often a sign of such fragmentation. All the evidence thus contradicts the idea that belonging to a local area automatically implies solidarity."*

Source: G. Dorronsoro, *Le gouvernement transnational de l'Afghanistan*, Karthala, 2021 (in French).

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## Take political and combatant solidarities into account in post-crisis actions.

Stabilization policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel were often built on an economics-based notion of insurgencies. These latter were viewed as the consequence of economic marginalization and the combatant considered as a *homo economicus* who can be demobilized in exchange for economic benefits. However, the recurrent failures of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and mediation processes have demonstrated that combatant ideologies and solidarities must be taken into consideration. Their moral and political dimension is clear from interviews collected during armed conflicts. For example, the question of the social status acquired by combatants, which cannot be reduced to economic gain, is decisive in a context often marked by strong generational tensions<sup>[2]</sup>. Because of the dangers faced by combatants, their devotion to a cause involves complex processes in which economic incentive is generally marginal. Their adhesion to armed struggle is based mostly on political and social reasons, implying a need for long-term development policies likely to transform their relationship to the central government, which is one of their key demands. The priority issues are lack of public services (especially the absence of justice) and/or the marginalization of certain populations. Only development policies that address these structural problems will provide alternative horizons for combatants and make their demobilization sustainable.

## Mainstream local projects into national policies to avoid fragmentation

Some stabilization policies have had counterproductive effects because they have concentrated excessively on the local level, to the detriment of central institutions. That focus is based on the perception (which sometimes proves accurate) that the central government is corrupt and resistant to reforms. In this case, the international solution is often to bypass the central government by setting up militia or self-defense groups, establishing “traditional” or “informal” conflict-resolution bodies, or by having local organizations provide public services. In Iraq, for example, the creation of Sunni militias relied on an identity-based interpretation of society. This led to the co-opting of prominent figures who were mistakenly perceived as representative leaders of the local people.

This preference for the local level for political action is based on the supposed existence of natural communities (village, valley, or clan) and their essentially apolitical character. The use of local terms to describe this local level (*shura/jirga* in Afghanistan, meetings between *fractions* in Mali) hides the fact that change in traditions and social engineering are undermining local elites, who are losing influence especially because of their association with donors and non-governmental organizations.

However, while not specific to crisis contexts, the ability of local actors to respond to social demands depends on their standing with national authorities, which are the only ones to have long-term resources and sanction capacities<sup>[3]</sup>. In Afghanistan, as in Iraq and Mali, groups that thrived by portraying themselves as representatives of a local area or community group were, in reality, dependent on external or central-government funding<sup>[4]</sup>. Development policies that contribute to consolidating a national political system therefore remain crucial for stabilizing the situation.

## Bolster cross-functional institutions of the central government by avoiding substitution at all costs.

Some stabilization projects tend to bypass central-government institutions due to time constraints, the fight against corruption, and the search for efficiency. But doing so risks weakening the systems whose re-establishment is a condition for withdrawal of aid. For example, the development and implementation of public policies may be requested from international or local NGOs, international organizations, businesses, diplomatic representations, armies, or intelligence services. However, those policies are sometimes in conflict with those of the central government. The *de facto* and sometimes *de jure* independence of those organizations from the central government raises the question of how they are regulated and coordinated.

In practice, the international organizations in charge of this rarely have the necessary resources. The scope of action of the national bureaucracy is therefore potentially weakened or even harmed by these actions, as shown by the collapse of the Afghan government in the summer of 2021 and the difficulties of the Iraqi and Malian administrations.

Yet, the weaker national institutions are, the more donors are tempted to promote the creation of *ad hoc* institutions. It is these latter that are the focus of resources, but they remain isolated from the rest of the administration and work primarily with those donors and NGOs. This silo effect further reduces the capacity of the political authorities to coordinate State institutions, which moreover often suffer from under-qualified staff and non-compliance of procedures due to the negligence of the bodies responsible for enforcing them. To counter this pattern inherent to the influx of international resources, development policies must give priority to cross-functional institutions, such as supervisory bodies, budget and statistics bodies, and schools that train elites<sup>[5]</sup>. This also implies allowing the central government to better supervise the funds available and to better coordinate donors and, by extension, the NGOs.

[2] Denia Chebli, “Cette paix qui divise : une analyse de la médiation au Mali par ses effets”, *Critique internationale*, 2020, No. 88, No. 3, pp. 9–30.

[3] Adam Baczko, *La guerre par le droit. Les tribunaux Talibans en Afghanistan*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2021, p. 158–166.

[4] Arthur Quesnay, *Guerre civile irakienne : Ordres partisans et politiques identitaires à Kirkouk*, Paris, Karthala, 2021 ; Denia Chebli, “Économie transnationale de la violence et autonomisation des milices au Nord du Mali”, *Cultures & Conflits*, 2022, No. 125, p. 95–113.

[5] Adam Baczko et Gilles Dorronsoro, “Une révolution bureaucratique avortée. Les énarques et l’État au Mali”, *Politique africaine*, 2023, vol. 2022/3, No. 167, pp. 75–96.

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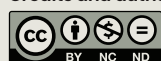
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