

Power, Politics, and Change: How International Actors Assess Local Context

Jenna Slotin, Vanessa Wyeth, and Paul Romita

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Cover Photo: Enrique Ter Horst (third from right), Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti, looking at a map of Haiti with members of the Canadian Battalion of UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, May 13, 1997. © UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JENNA SLOTIN is Research Fellow working on peacebuilding and state fragility at the International Peace Institute (IPI).

VANESSA WYETH is Senior Policy Analyst working on peacebuilding and state fragility at IPI.

PAUL ROMITA is Policy Analyst working on peacebuilding and state fragility at IPI.

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Executive Summary

In recent years, donor governments and international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank have developed a number of frameworks and tools to assess governance, conflict, and fragility.

This report argues that there are multiple, and often contradictory, objectives underlying the development and use of such assessment tools. Underpinning this multiplicity of objectives are deep assumptions, many of which remain unstated. Different agencies tend to define the problem through their own institutional lens, and the assessment tools they create reflect these biases. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—Development Assistant Committee’s (OECD-DAC’s) work on governance assessments has pointed out, assumptions underlying governance assessment methodologies are usually not explicit, but tend to measure governance against existing norms in OECD countries. Similarly, the different approaches to conflict assessment adopted by major bilateral and multilateral actors demonstrate conceptual and intellectual differences in their understanding of the nature of conflict; the same may be said for various donors’ approaches to assessing state fragility.

Overall, we found that experience with assessment tools has produced mixed results as far as impacts on decision making, planning, and programming are concerned. While the importance of producing good quality analysis cannot be overstated, the extent of an assessment’s influence is rarely, if ever, solely determined by the content or quality of analysis. The use of assessments appears to be determined by five key factors:

1. *Clarity of purpose*: Assessments may serve multiple purposes simultaneously. Different agencies within donor governments and multilateral organizations (or even different departments within the same agency) may have varying perspectives on the purpose and objectives of an assessment, how it should be conducted, its target audience, and the use of its results. The key is to clearly establish the purpose and expectations of the assessment from the outset to ensure that the choice of tool and process are appropriate.
2. *Timing and timeframes*: Timing appears to be a significant determinant of whether and how the results of an assessment are used. There is a tension between effectively feeding into planning cycles and responding to changing circumstances on the ground to inform time-sensitive decision making. Whatever the need, if the assessment misses the window of influence, it is likely to have little impact.
3. *Interests and incentives*: Individual and institutional interests and incentives have a significant impact on how effectively assessments are conducted, as well as how the results of the analysis produced by them are used. The importance of obtaining buy-in of field-office/embassy staff is often noted as a major determinant of the impact of an assessment. If scope for dissent from or change within a given policy, strategy, or program is limited, then receptivity to the results of an assessment is also likely to be limited.
4. *People and competencies*: Certain skills and competencies appear to be particularly valuable in generating an assessment that can be easily understood and effectively used. A focus on these competencies—including a mix of expertise, communication, leadership, and facilitation skills—may be more important than the tool itself. External consultants are often used to conduct assessments, but they come with benefits and drawbacks.
5. *Linkage between assessment and planning*: There is frequently inadequate attention paid to how assessment tools fit into broader strategic planning processes. Consequently, assessment processes are often one-off exercises, instead of efforts to collect and update analysis at regular intervals that can feed into planning cycles.

Where interagency or whole-of-government planning is the primary objective, practitioners tend to be agnostic about assessment methodology. In these cases, the emphasis is almost entirely on process—specifically, how to use the information and analysis produced through an assessment to help different actors agree on a basic storyline of the situation. Here the goal seems to be “good enough” analysis and a basic level of agreement among the key players in order to provide the basis for a common strategy.

Based on these findings, this report offers the following conclusions and recommendations:

Be realistic about what assessments can accomplish: The use of assessments has to be situated within the broader universe of political analysis that informs decision making, much of which is done informally. If the aim is to strengthen international actors' understanding of local context, instruments such as formal assessment tools represent only one way to capture this type of knowledge, and should be supported by other methods. There is a tendency to think that, on the strength of better analysis, international actors will be able to design better interventions. However, good analysis does not always point to solutions. More often, a truly nuanced analysis reveals the limitations of donor options.

Ensure that assessments are linked more consistently to an overarching planning cycle: Ideally, assessments should inform planning and implementation, followed by robust monitoring and evaluation of impact, with the ability to make midcourse corrections or respond to new opportunities or constraints posed by in-country developments. Donors should develop clear protocols that set out how the results of an assessment should feed into planning or programming, what the

appropriate link to monitoring and evaluation is, and how to disseminate the results of assessments to avoid their becoming one-off exercises. Fostering greater clarity vis-à-vis who constitute the end users of assessments, their information needs, and how to target and convey information in such a way that it can be readily fed into planning and decision-making processes could also ensure that assessments are more effectively used.

Shift the focus from tools to developing a culture of analysis: International actors must guard against excessive focus on the tools themselves, to the neglect of ensuring that political analysis is streamlined throughout development-agency thinking. Over time, the focus needs to shift from the tools to promoting a culture of analysis. This has implications for recruitment, training, and promotion of staff, as well as the importance of cultivating multiple sources of information and analysis locally and internationally. The goal should be to promote an analytical culture, whereby staff is encouraged to "think politically" so that strategies, programs, and day-to-day implementation are regularly informed by contextual information. This means prioritizing country, as well as thematic, expertise.

Introduction

The last decade of theory and practice has yielded important lessons about international efforts to prevent conflict, build peace, and foster the development of effective, legitimate, and resilient states capable of meeting the needs and expectations of their populations. Above all, it is now commonly accepted that statebuilding and peacebuilding are deeply political, context-specific processes: to be effective, international responses to fragile situations must therefore grapple with local context.¹ This means understanding several factors: historical trajectories of state formation; underlying drivers of conflict; interaction of political and economic processes within the state; relationships among communities and between state and society; sources of legitimacy that the state may lay claim to (and competitors for those sources); informal means of distributing rights and resources and settling disputes; and capacities for peace that exist within and outside the state. It also means analyzing key actors and their values, interests, strategies, incentives, and relationships of power, and the impact that external influence can have on these dynamics.

International actors are increasingly aware that a clear-eyed understanding of the underlying dynamics in fragile situations can enhance their country strategy and programming, a sentiment reflected in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) admonition to “take context as the starting point.”² To this end, recent years have seen a proliferation of assessment tools and frameworks (in particular, conflict, governance, and fragility assessments) developed by donor governments and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the World

Bank. These tools are intended, among other things, to identify the often intangible factors and relationships that drive political and economic behavior, as well as the points of friction, tension, and underlying grievances that could contribute to conflict.³ However, despite the innovative thinking that has gone into the development of these instruments, it is not clear what impact this type of analysis has had on international actors’ strategies and programs.

In light of these trends, the International Peace Institute (IPI) undertook a project called *Understanding Local Context*, which aims to evaluate the conceptual frameworks, processes, and uses of assessment tools developed by major multilateral and bilateral actors, in order to inform work in conflict-affected and otherwise fragile environments. This builds on recent work conducted by the OECD-DAC’s Network on Governance on donor uses of governance assessments, as well as other recent literature.⁴ The purpose of this project is two-fold: first, we seek to analyze the ways in which international actors use conflict, governance, and/or fragility assessment tools to understand the local context in which they work and the opportunities and challenges associated with these instruments. Second, we seek to investigate how these tools and the analysis they produce influence international actors’ decisions, planning, and programs.

This report presents findings and general observations from the first phase of *Understanding Local Context*. The purpose of this phase was to conduct an informal analysis of conflict, governance, and fragility/stability assessment tools developed by bilateral and multilateral actors and to draw out common themes and challenges with regard to the evolution and use of these tools. It

1 This has been highlighted in work by IPI and others, including Charles T. Call and Elizabeth M. Cousens, “Ending Wars and Building Peace,” Coping with Crisis Working Paper Series, New York: International Peace Academy, March 2007; Charles T. Call with Vanessa Wyeth, eds., *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008); Bruce Jones and Rahul Chandran with Elizabeth Cousens, Jenna Slotin, and Jake Sherman, “From Fragility to Resilience: Concepts and Dilemmas of Statebuilding in Fragile States,” research paper prepared for the OECD Fragile States Group, New York, March 2008; Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk, eds., *The Contradictions of State Building: Confronting the Dilemmas of Post-War Peace Operations* (London: Routledge, 2009).

2 OECD-DAC, “Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations,” Paris, April 2007, available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf. Similarly, point 21a of the *Accra Agenda for Action* commits donors to “conduct joint assessments of governance and capacity and examine the causes of conflict, fragility and insecurity, engaging developing country authorities and other relevant stakeholders to the maximum extent possible.” See *Accra Agenda for Action*, Accra, September 2008.

3 The development of assessment tools by governments and multilateral organizations has also been influenced by important efforts by nongovernmental organizations (such as Collaborative for Development Action, CARE, and the Conflict Prevention and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Network) to develop conflict-analysis tools. See Annex for a list of some of these tools.

4 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Survey of Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment,” Paris: OECD-DAC, February 2008; OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment Sourcebook,” Paris: OECD-DAC, August 2008. See also Stefan Meyer, “Governance Assessments and Domestic Accountability: Feeding Domestic Debate and Changing Aid Practices,” working paper, Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), June 2009.

presents a first attempt to investigate the question of whether assessments actually affect decision making, planning, and programming. This report is organized in four parts. The first part describes our approach for the first phase of the project. Subsequently, in part two, we offer some background on the development of assessment tools and the interaction between the evolution of these tools and recent thinking on state fragility. The third part describes our findings regarding the extent to which formal assessments influence decision making, planning, and programming. We conclude with some final observations and recommendations.

Approach and Methodology

The inspiration for this project was the general conclusion that international interventions must be rooted in a nuanced understanding of local context. The project's aim was to better understand how donors operationalize this objective via the use of assessment tools and frameworks, and whether efforts to do so influence decision making, planning, and programming—and to what extent.

It is important to note that the term “assessment” is used by various actors to refer to **several different types of exercises**. Many formal governance, conflict, and fragility tools were originally developed to be used by a single agency or department. Yet “assessment” has also come to refer to interagency exercises that are perhaps more accurately characterized as assessment or planning *processes*. The many governance, conflict, and fragility assessment tools that have been developed also focus on **different levels of analysis**. At the global level there are several initiatives that examine cross-country data to make comparisons

and rank countries on a variety of indicators.⁵ At the national level, there are a variety of assessment tools that look at the overall country context to inform a general strategy or a specific program. Some of these can also be adapted to focus on a specific geographic area or sector within a country, while other tools have been specifically designed to assess needs and dynamics in a particular sector.⁶

This project builds on recent studies that seek to map and evaluate the content and use of a range of assessment tools, notably the 2008 study commissioned by the OECD-DAC on governance assessments, which represents perhaps the most comprehensive study across a range of qualitative and quantitative tools.⁷ UNDP and the German Development Institute (DIE) have also recently produced a “Users’ Guide on Measuring Fragility,” which provides a comparative analysis of the conceptual premises, methodologies, and possible uses of eleven cross-country fragility indices.⁸ Our objective was to complement this work with a focus on those tools that are used by bilateral and multilateral actors to derive a qualitative picture of country context and that speak to the drivers of state fragility as understood today.⁹ We found that this type of analysis was typically generated by qualitative conflict and governance assessments, a subset of which focuses on political-economy analysis, as well as some newly adapted instruments that explicitly emphasize fragility.¹⁰

Initially, we mapped nine donors that have twenty-four tools among them, deliberately casting the net wide to capture a range of approaches.¹¹ Subsequently, we pursued in-depth interviews with officers in the governments of the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as independent experts who have

5 Examples of quantitative indices include internally developed ratings, such as the one used by USAID, and fragility indices developed by independent organizations such as the Fund for Peace’s Failed State Index, George Mason University’s Global Report on Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility, and Carleton University’s Country Indicators for Foreign Policy. See Annex for a more complete list of the fragility indices covered by initial desk research.

6 Examples of some sector-specific assessment tools include Transparency International’s corruption ratings, Freedom House’s democracy ratings, and sector-specific tools developed by donor governments, such as USAID’s Anticorruption Assessment Framework, the US Interagency Security Sector Assessment Framework, and Germany’s Security Sector Reform Assessment.

7 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Survey of Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment” and related documents.

8 UNDP and the German Development Institute (DIE), “Users’ Guide on Measuring Fragility,” UNDP/DIE, 2009.

9 For the purposes of this project, “bilateral and multilateral actors” refers to donor governments as well as the UN, the World Bank, and the European Commission. Assessment tools are typically developed and used by development agencies/departments within governments. However, recognizing the increasing prevalence of whole-of-government and integrated approaches, we also engaged officers in other parts of government.

10 Many of these conflict, governance, and fragility assessment tools draw on or otherwise incorporate some of the previously mentioned cross-country quantitative ratings and indices as part of their analyses.

11 This count includes the bilateral and multilateral actors’ tools captured by the mapping. By way of background, we also looked at tools developed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have informed the development of tools used by donor governments and multilateral organizations. See Annex for a full list of the tools covered by the initial mapping.

been involved in developing and applying various assessment tools.¹² We chose to focus our in-depth analysis on the experience of these four donors because of the number of tools they have in use, the consistency with which they have pursued the development of assessment tools over time, their ongoing efforts to refine the tools, and their willingness to share experiences and lessons learned.

We focused on “broad” conflict, governance, and fragility/stability tools that are typically used to garner an overall understanding of country context, although they are also sometimes used to assess dynamics in a particular sector or geographic region. In the interests of time and space, we did not assess sector-specific tools (such as assessments of the security sector), although, we recognize that many of these yield important information about context.

Following an initial round of interviews, IPI hosted a workshop in June 2009, which brought together twenty-four experts from donor governments, the United Nations, and independent research organizations with experience in designing and/or using assessment tools, as well as those who have been involved in using the analyses generated by these tools for decision making. The workshop offered a forum for the fruitful exchange of insights and further informed our analysis of international actors’ efforts to grapple with local context. Most of the workshop participants also had experience with interagency or whole-of-government assessment processes, which enhanced the project’s preliminary findings by highlighting several important lessons and observations related to the role of assessments in joined-up or integrated planning and decision making.

Background and Evolution of Assessment Tools

Conflict tools and governance tools have distinct origins with different underlying motivations. They

tend to mirror the thinking on conflict or governance that was dominant at a given donor agency when the tools were developed. As thinking on state fragility has evolved, newer assessment tools have tended to reflect these emerging ideas and, in some cases, have served as vehicles to promote newer thinking on state fragility and alternative ways of approaching and understanding context.

CONFLICT ASSESSMENTS

The development of conflict assessment tools in the 1990s was motivated by a desire to understand local conflict dynamics and the effects of external action on those dynamics. This was spurred by the realization that “normal” development was not suited to conflict settings and in some cases was doing harm by feeding into or exacerbating tensions. As a World Bank report on conflict assessment noted, “the need for conflict analysis is underpinned by recognition that there is a strong link between effective development and the social and economic factors affecting the trajectory of conflicts.”¹³ With the publication of early “do no harm” studies,¹⁴ development agencies began to acknowledge that since conflict is in part about the control of resources, injecting resources into a conflict country inevitably means involvement in the conflict.¹⁵ International actors began to see their interventions in conflict settings as both working *on* conflict—targeting and attempting to address the causes of armed conflict—and working *in* conflict—implementing assistance programs amid conditions of armed conflict.¹⁶ In order to improve both aspects of their interventions, conflict assessments were seen as essential to develop an understanding of conflict factors, actors, and dynamics, and to analyze the relationship between those dynamics and donor programming. Conducting conflict assessments, therefore, had two objectives: to better orient conflict programming in terms of prevention, mitigation, or reduction, and to make country and sector

12 We also interviewed officers in the Australian and Canadian governments who have been involved in deliberations on whether to develop formal assessment tools, but do not have such tools in use at the present time.

13 World Bank, “Effective Conflict Analysis: Overcoming Organizational Challenges,” Report No. 36446-GLB, June 2006, p. 3.

14 Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), “International Assistance and Conflict: An Exploration of Negative Impacts,” Issue Paper, July 1994; Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

15 Dan Smith, “Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding: Getting Their Act Together,” Overview Report of the Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding, Oslo, January 2004.

16 *Ibid.*

programs conflict sensitive.¹⁷

Although they vary from donor to donor,¹⁸ conflict assessments tend to include analysis of structural and proximate causes of conflict and opportunities/capacities for peace (sometimes called drivers and mitigators of conflict). These tools have been heavily influenced by the vast academic scholarship produced in the 1990s on the so-called “root causes” of civil war, which could be roughly summarized in the debate between the two competing interpretations—“greed” versus “grievance.”¹⁹ In fact, several of these tools focus on the role of “greed and grievance” in fueling conflict, which emphasizes the capture of resources by government elites and nonstate actors (greed) and the sense of injustice experienced by sectors of the population (grievance) that believe they have been unfairly disenfranchised.²⁰ Conflict assessments typically include analyses of actors, their interests and incentives, access to resources, and the dynamics among them. Several of these tools, such as DFID’s Strategic Conflict Assessment (SCA), USAID’s Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF), Sida’s Manual for Conflict Analysis, and UNDP’s Conflict-Related Development Analysis, also include a final step that seeks to develop strategies or options for donor programming.

Some conflict assessments include an analysis of international responses and the way these responses interact with the dynamics of war and peace. For example, UNDP’s Conflict-Related Development Analysis explores prospective international and regional strategies to manage security, political, economic, and social challenges in conflict-affected countries, in addition to analyzing possible national, subnational, and local approaches. Likewise, DFID’s SCA assesses how international responses “interact with the dynamics of conflict” in the military/security, diplomatic,

trade, immigration, and development spheres.²¹ Explicit in these frameworks is the assumption that external actors risk exacerbating conflict drivers if they do not have a good understanding of how their interventions may interact with local dynamics.²²

Many of these tools are still in use and have been periodically updated since their inception. They are typically seen as analytical tools that can be applied to a particular sector, region, or country. However, they have been criticized for failing to respond to new research or thinking (e.g., missing the most recent findings on the role of inequalities in conflict) and failing to reconcile competing arguments about the causes and nature of conflict.²³ Conflict assessments are used variously as stand-alone exercises to inform country strategies, as a component of a larger assessment and planning process, or as a “lens” that is incorporated into other assessments by adding a series of steps to the assessment process, or by including a conflict expert in an assessment team.

GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENTS

The development of governance assessment tools was sparked by a renewed interest in governance, as traditional arguments in favor of the role of the market and nonstate actors in economic growth gave way to the realization that poor development performance was due, at least in part, to the state’s failure to provide an enabling environment for private actors and enterprises to flourish. This renewed interest had to be translated into policies and programming, and, for that, an assessment of the governance context in partner countries was required. Governance assessment tools were created by development agencies in parallel with the conflict assessments, and range from quantitative ratings of performance, such as the World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment or the

17 In addition to providing information about context to inform conflict programming, conflict analysis is also used as an operational component of programs that aim to prevent or resolve conflict. In this respect, it is often used as a basis to promote dialogue and reconciliation among individuals and communities by helping to develop a commonly accepted narrative of the conflict and its root causes. Given our project’s focus on international actors’ understanding of country context, this use of conflict analysis was not addressed by the study.

18 A range of governmental, multilateral, and nongovernmental actors use conflict assessments. However, our focus here is on donors’ use of these tools.

19 See, for example, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (October 2004); Mats Berdal and David Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); and Ted Robert Gurr, “Containing Internal War in the Twenty-First Century,” in *From Reaction to Conflict Prevention: Opportunities for the UN System*, edited by Fen Osler Hampson and David Malone (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 48–50.

20 See, for example, USAID, “Conducting a Conflict Assessment: A Framework for Strategy and Program Development,” April 2005; DFID, “Conducting Conflict Assessments: Guidance Notes,” January 2002; and Sida, “Manual for Conflict Analysis,” January 2006.

21 DFID, “Conducting Conflict Assessments: Guidance Notes,” p. 19.

22 Here the influence of Mary Anderson’s “do no harm” approach is quite clear.

23 See, among others, Susan L. Woodward, “Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 2 (June 2007).

US Millennium Challenge Corporation Scorecard, to qualitative analyses of the governance context. The latter are typically focused on political systems and public administration, and deal explicitly with corruption. Many of them also assess social governance issues including pro-poor spending and access to and effectiveness of service delivery.²⁴ Like conflict analysis, some governance assessments map actors as well as their interests, incentives, and relationships.

Within the group of qualitative-assessment tools, the more traditional type of assessment frameworks focuses on how formal institutions are performing at a particular moment in time, often with embedded normative assumptions about what “functioning governance” means. As the OECD-DAC’s work on governance assessments points out, assumptions underlying governance assessment methodologies are usually not explicit, but tend to measure governance against existing norms in OECD countries.²⁵ Unlike conflict assessments, which tend to be conducted on an ad hoc basis, in response to a perceived need from headquarters or field officials, governance assessments are often mandatory for all countries to which a donor provides development assistance. This means that they are applied across a range of countries, from the more stable to those that are considered fragile or conflict-affected. It also means that while governance assessments provide an important basis for understanding country context, they are also often used explicitly as a platform for engagement and dialogue with partners on governance programming and reform.

Although our project did not seek to evaluate assessment tools in terms of how effective they are as a platform for engagement with partner governments, it is worth noting that the OECD’s study of governance assessments has produced important findings regarding the role of partner governments

in assessments. The OECD-DAC Sourcebook notes that the majority of the tools included in the survey of governance assessments only involve partners to a limited degree.²⁶ Other efforts seek to strengthen the capacity of governments to assess themselves, and citizens to assess their governments, such as International IDEA’s State of Democracy assessment methodology.²⁷ While the OECD-DAC acknowledges that international actors often have legitimate reasons for keeping assessments confidential, transparency is encouraged to the fullest extent possible. Moreover, due to the enormous burden that donors often place on partner governments by pursuing multiple separate assessments (one example being Zambia, where in 2008, ten different governance assessment processes were ongoing, not including the government’s own annual report on the state of governance in the country),²⁸ the OECD-DAC’s findings recommend aligning with domestically driven governance assessments and/or pursuing greater harmonization among donors where assessments are meant to serve as a platform for dialogue on governance reform.²⁹

ASSESSING STATE FRAGILITY³⁰

In the last decade, a new focus has emerged on state fragility, initially spurred by post-9/11 concerns about weak states as “vectors” for terrorism and other global bads that threatened the interests and security of powerful Western countries.³¹ These concerns were paralleled by growing consensus, particularly in UN circles, on the centrality of the state for sustainable peacebuilding, and the need for effective and legitimate institutions to manage competition and conflict within society. The relevance of longstanding concerns about governance and the promotion of a governance agenda for development were central to this debate. Donors increasingly realized that so-called “fragile states” were lagging behind other low-income

24 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Survey of Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment,” Paris: OECD-DAC, February 2008.

25 See concept paper for OECD-DAC Network on Governance “Conference on Governance Assessment and Aid Effectiveness,” London, February 20-21, 2008.

26 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments Sourcebook,” p. 19.

27 See David Beetham, Edzia Carvalho, Todd Landman, and Stuart Weir, *Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2008).

28 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Survey of Donor Approaches to Governance Assessment,” p. 17.

29 OECD-DAC Network on Governance, “Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments Sourcebook,” p. 19.

30 This section draws on Vanessa Wyeth and Tim Sisk, “Rethinking Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries,” Discussion Note for the OECD-DAC International Network on Conflict and Fragility, New York, June 2009.

31 See James Fearon and David Laitin, “Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 5-23. For a US-national-interest perspective, see Stephen D. Krasner and Carlos Pascual, “Addressing State Failure,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2005): 153ff., as well as the White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” Washington, DC, 2002.

countries in progress on the Millennium Development Goals, and that normal development policies needed to be tailored to the unique challenges posed by state fragility.

As fragile states have moved to the top of the international policy agenda, bringing concerns about conflict and weak governance with them, thinking on fragility has evolved. A new focus on “statebuilding” emerged in the early 2000s, which initially tended to define the problem as one of weak state capacity, and emphasized building/strengthening institutional capacity in countries emerging from conflict.³² However, this argument did little to address the political nature of the challenges faced by conflict-affected and fragile states. More recent studies (notably work sponsored by the OECD-DAC) emphasize state-society relations, and locate fragility in the breakdown of the political process through which state and society negotiate mutual expectations and manage relationships of power.³³ Increasingly, there is a focus on the notion of state “resilience” as the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness, or legitimacy, whether in the form of sudden shocks or crises, or through long-term erosion.³⁴ This and subsequent work has placed the concept of legitimacy—as both a means to building state capacity and an end in itself—squarely at the center of the debate.

As thinking on state fragility has evolved, violent conflict has come to be seen simultaneously as a cause, symptom, and consequence of fragility, depending on the situation.³⁵ A common undercurrent of state fragility is the vulnerability of the government to recurring crises of legitimacy and authority. Fragile states face heightened risk of conflict; many have experienced conflict in the recent past, whereas others may exhibit a breakdown in social cohesion and political processes to manage competition, putting them at

risk for violent conflict.³⁶ Therefore, much of the thinking that has gone into understanding conflict, how to prevent it and to build peace in its wake has influenced the current agenda around state fragility.

While these views on fragility have gained considerable traction at a conceptual level,³⁷ they pose significant challenges for practice, where a technocratic approach to delivering development assistance and an aversion to engaging in politics tend to prevail. Putting state-society relations at the center of the debate implies engaging with both formal and informal modes of governance at multiple levels of state and society. International actors generally have inadequate understanding of the various sources of legitimacy, the process by which states legitimate their authority, and pathways for strengthening state legitimacy in contexts where other actors and institutions (often informal, nonstate) compete with the state for legitimacy.³⁸

In response to these challenges, a new generation of assessment tools using “political-economy analysis” has emerged. These tools explore the “underlying factors (including history, geography, sources of government revenue, deeply embedded social and economic structures) that shape formal and informal relationships between the state and organized groups in society, and thus the incentives that are driving politicians and policy makers and the potential pressures for or against progressive change.”³⁹ Although they are still commonly considered to be governance assessments, assessments based on political-economy analysis draw on some of the thinking that underlay earlier efforts at conflict analysis, combined with evolving thinking on state fragility. As described by one donor’s internal guidance, they strive to “get beyond the façade of the state” and to grapple with the formal and informal relationships of power within society and between state and society.⁴⁰ The most

32 See Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

33 See Jones, Chandran, et al., “From Fragility to Resilience”; and OECD-DAC, “Statebuilding in Situations of Fragility: Initial Findings,” August 2008.

34 *Ibid.*

35 UNDP/DIE, “Users’ Guide on Measuring Fragility.”

36 Wyeth and Sisk, “Rethinking Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.”

37 Following the finalization of “From Fragility to Resilience,” which was an independently produced concept paper, OECD-DAC members produced a consensus document that summarizes their initial findings on statebuilding in fragile situations. See “State Building in Situations of Fragility, Initial Findings.”

38 Eric Scheye, “The Statebuilding Misconception in the Fragile and Post-Conflict State,” unpublished article, 2008.

39 Sue Unsworth, “Is Political Analysis Changing Donor Behavior?,” September 2008, unpublished, p. 1.

40 See “Framework for Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis (SGACA): Designing Strategic Responses Towards Good Governance,” Prepared by the Clingendael Institute for the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2008, p. 5.

prominent examples of assessment based on political-economy analysis include the UK's Drivers of Change Analysis, Sida's Power Analysis, and the Netherlands' Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis (SGACA).

In addition to being used to assess context, these tools have also become vehicles to advance an alternative way of thinking about country dynamics and the role of external actors therein. Specifically, they are encouraging development-agency staff to see development through the lens of local actors' incentives for and against progressive change and to consider the realistic scope of external influence on those incentives.⁴¹ In this sense the tools are being used to promote a cultural shift within development agencies by fostering political-economy thinking among development practitioners who tend toward technocratic approaches. This highlights the interactive relationship between current thinking and assessment tools. The political-economy approach is increasingly seen as the most nuanced analytical approach to get at the diverse facets of fragility within a given country. However, it has also proved to be the most difficult analytical approach to translate into strategy development and operational guidance.

The preoccupation with fragile states has also motivated some donor governments to develop tools that explicitly focus on various dimensions of fragility, which in many cases means incorporating security concerns into more traditional governance analyses. The Stability Assessment Framework (SAF), developed for use by the Dutch government in 2005, reflected a greater concern with stability and security than previous conflict or governance tools, and built in a trend analysis to trace instability in a given country. Later, the Dutch saw the need to modify their Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis (SGACA)—a tool that uses political economy analysis—for fragile states. They did so by bringing elements of the SAF into the SGACA methodology. The result is their Fragile

States Assessment Methodology (FSAM).⁴²

In 2005 USAID also embarked on an effort to develop a Fragile States Assessment Framework (FSA). Intended to offer internal guidance to USAID for understanding fragility in selected countries, its purpose was to identify program responses within fragile states that would promote improvements in their governance and establish a foundation for their transformational development. Although field-tested in two countries, the FSA was never finalized. However, interviews indicate that elements of the analysis, particularly the focus on identifying the dynamics of fragility and resilience through the framework of effectiveness and legitimacy, are being incorporated into USAID's revised version of the Conflict Assessment Framework.

Several interviewees noted that each of the tools has been shaped to some extent by the particular political, bureaucratic, and conceptual prerogatives of the agencies that have developed them. Different agencies tend to define the problem through their own institutional lens, and the assessment tools they create reflect these biases. For instance, the different approaches to conflict assessment adopted by major bilateral and multilateral actors demonstrate conceptual and intellectual differences in their understanding of the nature of conflict; the same may be said for various donor governments' approaches to assessing state fragility.⁴³ Seeing the evolution of donor agendas in this way provides some hints as to how conflict, governance, and fragility tools have evolved and influenced one another. It also sheds light on the conceptual frameworks that underpin international actors' efforts to grapple with country context, as well as the assumptions they bring to assessments and the expectations they have of these tools. The different pathways by which donors have developed these instruments, and the thinking that underpins these efforts, have important implications for the types of donor policies and programs that such analyses prescribe.

41 Unsworth, "Is Political Analysis Changing Donor Behavior?"

42 The tools used by the Dutch government have been developed by the Netherlands Institute for International Affairs—Clingendael.

43 For example, an analysis of conflict assessments conducted by five different donors in Sri Lanka between 2000 and 2006 reveals differing diagnoses of the nature of the conflict, resulting in very different prescriptions for donor responses. These ranged from a narrow focus on securing and implementing a ceasefire agreement, to private-sector development and creation of economic opportunities, to responses focused on addressing group and regional grievances. See Vanna Chan, Ellena Fotinatos, Joyce Pisarello, Liat Shetret, and Melissa Waits, "International Peace Institute SIPA Capstone Workshop: Assessing Post-Conflict and Fragile States—Evaluating Donor Frameworks: Final Report," unpublished, May 2009.

WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACHES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO ASSESSMENTS

Many formal governance and conflict assessment tools were originally developed for use by a single entity (a bilateral development agency such as DFID or a multilateral development agency such as UNDP) to analyze a particular country situation and inform internal decisions related to the development of a new program or country strategy, adjustment of an existing program or strategy, or decisions about aid allocation. However, “assessment” has also come to refer to interagency exercises, either across ministries/departments of a government (whole of government), across entities within the UN system, or among several actors on the ground (national and international) in a given country. These exercises aim to promote a common understanding of the country context as a basis for joint or integrated decision making. They are perhaps more accurately termed planning or assessment *processes* (although they often carry the term assessment in their name, as in the UN-World Bank Post-Conflict Needs Assessment, or the US government’s Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment), whereby the analysis of context is one part of a larger consensus-building and planning exercise.

In recent years, many of the assessment tools that were originally developed to feed into single-entity decision making are now sometimes used for the interagency purpose described above. This seems to be driven by two factors. First, thinking on international engagement in fragile situations has evolved toward an understanding that a joined-up political, security, and development strategy is required to respond effectively in these situations.⁴⁴ Second is the realization that one of the major challenges of interagency planning is that political, security, and development actors have different institutional goals, cultures, and languages and each brings its own perspective and understanding of the context to the table. Rather than waiting until the planning stage (when perspectives are fully formed) to bring these actors together, conducting joint

assessments aims to get everyone on the same page by breaking down actors’ preconceived assumptions, thereby providing a basis for integrated decision making. This is perhaps most common within the UN system where the political, security, humanitarian, and development pillars of the organization have been working to promote an integrated UN response in postconflict countries for several years.⁴⁵ It has also taken place where bilateral donors have begun to adopt “whole-of-government” approaches in their engagement with fragile and conflict-affected countries.⁴⁶ In addition, it is becoming more common with the promotion of “whole-of-system” approaches where international and national actors seek to promote greater alignment between international efforts and national priorities, as well as greater harmonization and complementarity among national and international efforts in a particular country. Therefore, in addition to their analytical function, assessments are increasingly being used as a platform to foster more coherent engagement in fragile situations.

In the course of our analysis, interviewees uniformly agreed that assessments should not be ends in themselves. Yet, considerable time and resources have been invested in developing, implementing and refining formal assessment tools. To what extent have they influenced the ultimate objective of fostering more context-sensitive external engagement in fragile situations?

Extent of Influence

Overall, we found that experience with assessment tools has produced mixed results as far as impacts on decision making, planning, and programming are concerned. The importance of producing good quality analysis cannot be overstated: a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as diverse sources of information, is essential to ensure as nuanced and rich an understanding of a situation as possible. Yet, the balance between a detailed and comprehensive assessment and one that produces usable analysis for decision making presents significant challenges. Moreover, content

44 See Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown, *Greater than the Sum of its Parts? Assessing “Whole of Government” Approaches to Fragile States* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007).

45 For more on UN integration issues, see Espen Barth Eide, Anja Therese Kaspersen, Randolph Kent, and Karen von Hippel, “Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations,” Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2005; or Susanna P. Campbell and Anja T. Kaspersen, “The UN’s Reforms: Confronting Integration Barriers,” *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 4 (2008): 470-485.

46 See Patrick and Brown, *Greater than the Sum of its Parts?*

cannot be divorced from process: the extent of an assessment's influence is rarely, if ever, solely determined by the content or quality of analysis.

The use of assessments appears to be determined by five key factors:

1. Clarity of purpose
2. Timing and timeframes
3. Interests and incentives
4. People and competencies
5. Linkage between assessment and planning

Where interagency planning is the primary objective, practitioners tend to be agnostic about assessment methodology. In these cases, the emphasis is almost entirely on process—specifically, on how to use the information and analysis produced through an assessment to help different actors agree on a basic storyline of the situation. Here the goal seems to be “good enough” analysis and a basic level of agreement among the key players in order to provide the basis for a common strategy.

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

There are multiple, and often contradictory, objectives underlying the development and use of assessment tools. Different actors are often driven by different impulses; different entities within the same government (or even different departments of the same ministry) and different departments/agencies within multilateral organizations may have very different understandings of what the purpose and objectives of assessments are, whom the audience should be, what they should cover, how they should be conducted, and how results should be used.

Our research produced the following list of purposes for which assessments have been designed and used:⁴⁷

- Deciding whether or not to engage in a partner country, or to scale up (or down) existing levels of support;
- Reorienting or designing a country or sector strategy or program (or justifying an existing strategy or program);
- Developing more-realistic expectations of what aid might accomplish given the political, economic, social, and cultural constraints of a particular

country situation and the actor's own political and bureaucratic constraints;

- Stimulating internal dialogue among staff and fostering new ways of analyzing specific problems and modes of engagement;
- Avoiding the unintended consequences of external action and guarding against the risks of state capture and corruption;
- Making existing or planned aid programs more sensitive to drivers of conflict;
- Providing baseline analysis against which progress may be measured;
- Modeling or predicting the likelihood of instability;
- Informing decisions about aid allocation and funding modalities in light of fiduciary risk;
- Ensuring accountability and transparency in the use of aid resources;
- Stimulating a discussion about reform with the partner country; and
- Serving as a platform for interagency planning and consensus building.

Each purpose or combination of purposes will demand different kinds of information and analyses. Thus the content of assessments, as well as the process by which they are undertaken, will often be shaped by the purpose. As noted by interviewees, this can be a double-edged sword: there is a risk of missing important information if the assessment is too heavily focused on responding to a specific purpose. However, assessments that do not respond to the immediate decision-making needs of an organization also risk being disregarded.

Challenges often arise when the purpose of an assessment is not clearly established from the outset, leading to differing, and even competing, expectations of how the assessment should be used (this holds true whether between different offices/departments of the same agency, between headquarters and field offices, or between different ministries and departments across government). For example, some actors may be particularly concerned with getting an accurate assessment of corruption in order to determine fiduciary risk and, therefore require that the assessment be kept confidential in order to ensure that it is not watered down. At the same time, other actors may see the

⁴⁷ A similar list of purposes may be found in the OECD-DAC, “Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments,” Conference Report, 2008.

assessment as a basis for dialogue on reform with the partner government and consequently feel that the government's involvement in the assessment is essential to ensure buy-in and to build trust. (As noted above, recent work by the OECD-DAC acknowledges that, while transparency may be preferred, donors also have legitimate reasons for keeping assessments confidential.⁴⁸) The key is to clearly establish the purpose and expectations of the assessment from the outset to ensure that the choice of tool and process is appropriate. That said, our interviews also indicated that resource and time constraints will inevitably force assessments to respond to multiple goals. The challenge then becomes one of making these goals explicit from the outset and drawing on multiple resources, sources of information, and tools to ensure the assessment process speaks to the various decision-making needs of the agency(ies) it is designed to support.

TIMING AND TIMEFRAMES

Timing appears to be a significant determinant of whether and how the results of an assessment are used. There is a tension between effectively feeding into planning cycles and responding to changing circumstances on the ground to inform time-sensitive decision making. Whatever the need, if the assessment misses the window of influence, it is likely to have little impact.

Some assessments are mandatory and are linked to regular planning cycles, such as the Dutch SGACA and DFID's Country Governance Assessment (CGA). Others are initiated on an ad hoc basis, triggered when a donor agency's headquarters, or, less frequently, field office senses the need to reevaluate its strategic approach and/or when the partner country has experienced critical political changes. In general, governance assessments are more likely to be mandatory, while conflict assessments are more likely to be ad hoc.

In many cases, we found that while several tools are meant to be linked to strategic planning processes or programming cycles, this linkage frequently does not occur as envisioned. The reasons for this discrepancy may vary: in some cases, assessments may be conducted as one-off events and the timing may not coincide with

decision-making processes. Formal mechanisms may not exist to feed analysis into planning, or to help translate analysis into policy options. In other cases, this disconnect may be due to high-level political decisions. For example, the implementation of the Dutch SGACA was originally carefully timed so that the results of the analysis would feed into the development of multiannual strategic plans. However, with the arrival of a new minister of foreign affairs, the planning timeline was pushed forward by a year, with the result that the vast majority of country plans had to be designed before the assessments were carried out.

Whatever the reasons for this disconnect, the consequences are predictably negative: findings may not be incorporated into relevant program initiatives, and analysis loses its direct relevance to decision makers who do not have the time to consider information that cannot be practically applied. When the time comes for the next programming cycle or strategic review, the analysis provided by an assessment not linked to these processes may be overlooked, or rendered obsolete. One interviewee emphasized the need to pinpoint the relevant "window of influence" in terms of headquarters or field-level decision making and ensure that assessments feed in at the appropriate time.

At the same time, there is a tension between timing assessments to influence programming cycles and the need for real-time guidance. Conflict-affected and fragile states present complex and volatile environments, where real-time events often overtake efforts to analyze them. There are tradeoffs between ensuring that findings are incorporated into programming cycles (thus dictating the timing of analyses), and conducting analyses at important key moments as and when they arise, such as peace processes, power shifts, elections, or other moments of particularly high tension or dramatic political change. On the one hand, analysis risks being untimely; on the other, actors can be left with findings that point to important political opportunities, but no way to translate them into programming. The challenge is in finding the optimal point between supply (in terms of funding cycles, incentives to engage, and

48 See OECD-DAC, "Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments, Guiding Principles for Enhanced Impact, Usage and Harmonization," Paris, March 2009.

human and financial resources) and demand (such as historical moments and opportunities to engage more fruitfully). These considerations suggest that assessments should not be a “one-off” exercise, but rather a continuing activity, possibly synchronized with key events in the context under scrutiny.

While a more resource-intensive and time-consuming analysis may produce a stronger final product, sometimes such a luxury is not available because the pace of events requires rapid decision making. International actors may be willing to invest these resources in countries of high importance, but these same countries are the ones in which political pressure to act is highest, and where international actors rarely have the luxury of time to wait for the results of analysis before devising a strategy for engagement. The need to manage this tension is reflected in the flexible timeframes that are allotted to various assessment processes. There is scope for considerable variation within the timeframe of some assessment processes, with obvious consequences for the depth and breadth of the analysis. For example, the recently developed US Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) could take place over several weeks, but it could also be conducted in as little as a day and a half in response to a crisis. Likewise, while Sida’s Manual for Conflict Analysis is usually undertaken in six to twelve weeks, it can also be carried out as a rapid desk study as circumstances require.

The different time horizons of ministries, agencies, and departments within a government or multilateral organization influence the kind of information that is sought from an assessment. While development agencies are oriented to digest longer and more detailed analyses to feed into year-long and often multiyear planning and programming, foreign ministry and peacekeeping staff articulated a need for quick and targeted analysis that can be translated easily into strategic and operational options. Political-economy analysis in particular has fallen victim to these differing expectations, with foreign-ministry staff arguing that its impact is limited because of the difficulty of translating it into concrete and immediate policy options.

INTERESTS AND INCENTIVES⁴⁹

Regardless of the quality or purpose of an assessment, political interests can have a significant influence on the focus of assessments or the extent to which their results are considered. In addition, individual and institutional incentives are rarely aligned in support of assessments, which may demand more work from staff and challenge the status quo.

A variety of interests and incentives appear to be at play in assessment processes. Political prerogatives at the highest levels of government can influence the nature and use of the analysis produced through formal assessments. For instance, the emphasis of a particular tool’s analysis may reflect ministerial or parliamentary objectives, as in the case of the Netherlands’ SGACA, which has a strong focus on corruption because of parliamentary concerns related to misappropriated aid in partner countries. In other cases, a low premium has been placed on the analysis provided through formal assessments by ministers who do not entirely trust the judgment or skills of the bureaucracy working beneath them.

The importance of obtaining buy-in of field-office/embassy staff—in both conducting an assessment and letting the resulting analysis influence programming and policy decisions—is often noted as a major determinant of the impact of an assessment. Securing buy-in can be challenging for many reasons. Participation in and attention to the results of assessments often require staff on the ground to make commitments of time and energy, requiring them to adapt their thinking and work responsibilities. Interviews indicated that field staff may believe that their participation in an assessment process takes them away from more pressing responsibilities, that the assessment exercise is being imposed upon them by headquarters, or that the analysis only confirms what they already know. Moreover, in an aid agency where the primary focus is on spending allocated funds, there are strong incentives in favor of sticking with a particular strategy or program direction. As one interviewee noted, political-economy analysis in particular can highlight risks and pose questions that may contradict development mandates and

49 For more on interests and incentives underpinning the use of assessments, see Unsworth, “Is Political Analysis Changing Donor Behavior?”

relationships with partner countries. It may recommend changing, reducing, or diverting a planned program in which there is considerable personal and institutional investment.

Beyond the individual incentives to support particular programs, there are strong bureaucratic, political, and institutional barriers to change within development agencies and strong incentives that reinforce the status quo.⁵⁰ There are inbuilt incentives in an organization that programs millions of dollars of development assistance not to question the underlying assumptions on which those programs are based, and to demonstrate that the programs are in fact working. The findings of an assessment can drastically challenge the status quo, calling for much longer-term engagement than current planning horizons foresee, demanding a serious rethinking of the way problems are being approached, or recommending a reevaluation of the national and local actors with whom to engage. Paradoxically, it may also call for international actors to recognize that their influence is limited, scale down their ambitions, and channel their efforts to areas where they have the greatest chance of making a difference. Some of these are decisions that can only be made at the highest policy levels. If scope for dissent from or change within a given policy, strategy, or program is limited, then receptivity to the results of an assessment is also likely to be limited. Even where there is a strong inclination to respond to this analysis, interviews indicated that it is difficult for practitioners to change the way international assistance is delivered without strong political backing.⁵¹

The partner country frequently has incentives and disincentives to participate in assessment processes. On the one hand, the partner government may support a process it believes will lead to enhanced development assistance, more funding for a particularly weak sector, or more broadly, policies and decisions that help it to mitigate conflict. On the other hand, such processes can be time consuming and place enormous burdens on partner country capacities, taking key government officials away from critical tasks where their services are at a premium. Assessments may also

reveal frailties in governance or cleavages in society, and result in less-than-flattering appraisals that may weaken the government's position vis-à-vis its international partners. Recognizing these challenges, efforts within the OECD-DAC's Governance Network have produced five guiding principles to enhance the impact, usage, and harmonization of governance assessments. These include building on and strengthening nationally driven governance assessments as well as harmonizing donor assessments when the aim is to stimulate dialogue and governance reform.⁵²

PEOPLE AND COMPETENCIES

People matter. Certain skills and competencies appear to be particularly valuable in generating an assessment that can be easily understood and effectively used. A focus on these competencies may be more important than the tool itself. External consultants are often used to conduct assessments, but they come with benefits and drawbacks.

Practitioners frequently point to a mix of skill sets and competencies that are valued in assessment processes, some of which are particularly pertinent for interagency assessments. In addition to valuing people with strong analytical skills, they generally point to the following types of personnel:

- *Experts:* At the most tangible level, most mention the importance of including experts: people with specialized sectoral, thematic, or country-specific knowledge, as well as experts in the tool or type of methodology being used. In fact, such specialized personnel are generally included as a matter of protocol in the composition of assessment teams.
- *Translators:* In order to ensure that the knowledge of experts is shared effectively throughout the group, it is also important that they (or others in the team who understand their work) can communicate it well, thus “translating” esoteric, subject-specific content into easily accessible information that can be used by the broader team. One interviewee also noted that the “translator” function is particularly valuable in an interagency setting where political, military, and development actors are likely to bring different cultures and mindsets to a particular issue.

50 For more on operational, institutional, and intellectual barriers to change, see *ibid.*

51 Some assessment frameworks explicitly engage with this paradox. For example, USAID's DG assessment includes a final filter in the assessment framework that examines the donor's own interests and institutional and political constraints.

52 See OECD-DAC, “Donor Approaches to Governance Assessments, Guiding Principles for Enhanced Impact.”

- *Leaders*: An assessment team should include personnel with good leadership skills and appropriate decision-making authority, who can guide the process effectively and help ensure that the results of an analysis are taken seriously and acted upon. What seems crucial, however, is ensuring that there are not several sources of authority that risk clashing with one another and paralyzing the process.
- *Facilitators*: Where an assessment culminates in a workshop that is meant to help develop options and strategies for the country office/embassy (common practice with the Dutch SGACA as well as other actors' assessments), facilitation skills become particularly important. In the case of interagency assessments, team members with good facilitation skills can help to build consensus on difficult issues, negotiate compromises among divergent perspectives, and foster a cordial working environment.

This list describes broad types of skills needed for assessments, and need not be viewed as discrete categories of personnel in an assessment team. *Experts* can be good *translators*, and in general, a talented team member may fit into two or more of these categories simultaneously. However it is important to realize that skill in one area does not necessarily denote skill in another, as was commonly noted among interviewees particularly with respect to facilitation skills.

Consultants—including international and/or locally based consultants—frequently play a significant role in assessment processes, as reflected in tools employed by the UK, the US, the Netherlands, and Sweden, among others. Heavy reliance on consultants has benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, consultants may provide thematic and country-specific expertise and cultural sensitivity not otherwise readily available. They may also bring a fresh perspective to bear, and are often seen as more independent and less biased in their analysis than agency staff. The use of consultants is also intended to minimize any extra burden on agency staff, which might otherwise be taken away from their day-to-day activities to participate in or conduct an assessment. On the other hand, consultants lack first-hand institutional knowledge of the organization that has contracted them, which means they will be less familiar with the resource

and political constraints that characterize the policy environment to which the assessment needs to respond. Using consultants also represents a lost opportunity to train a new cadre of staff in order to “embed” political thinking across an organization, and help ensure that assessments are living tools rather than one-off exercises, and may reinforce a tendency to prioritize thematic expertise rather than country knowledge.

The use of consultants may compound some of the problems of buy-in discussed above. To put it crudely, assessments produced by external consultants are sometimes dismissed because they are regarded as “outsiders” who do not understand the agency for which the assessment was conducted. Another challenge is that external consultants may not have access to sensitive information that could greatly enhance the quality of the assessment. A number of interviewees noted that, while engaging local consultants in assessment processes can provide much-needed local knowledge and cultural sensitivity, it is important to balance their viewpoints with multiple local perspectives to guard against the possible biases of an individual who belongs to a certain socioeconomic, political, ethnic, geographic, or religious group. In this, as in any analytical study, triangulation of data and information remains essential to guarantee a rigorous final product.

As noted above, the emergence of political-economy analysis has increasingly placed an emphasis on changing the intellectual culture of development agencies, in effect encouraging staff to “think politically.” One interviewee noted that political-economy analysis is less about tools and more about networks, people, and knowledge. At its core, this approach to assessments is a *way of thinking* about the problem; ideally, assessments should serve as a platform for bringing relevant stakeholders together to reorient policy, programming, and planning to take into account analysis of state-society relations and the incentives for and against progressive change in the partner country.⁵³ Several interviewees noted that if the political-economy approach is to be fully mainstreamed in development agencies, assessments and planning processes will need to be complemented by a

53 See Unsworth, “Is Political Analysis Changing Donor Behavior?”

serious investment in recruiting and training staff that can integrate political thinking into their work. It also means investment in country, as well as thematic, expertise. A recent step in this direction is the development of a “How-to Note”⁵⁴ for DFID staff on conducting political-economy analysis. Interviews also indicate that a similar guidance note is under development for staff in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

LINKAGE BETWEEN ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

Overall, we found that there has been a disproportionate emphasis on the development of assessment tools and their implementation, and insufficient attention to how the assessment fits into broader strategic planning processes. As a result, assessments are commonly one-off exercises, rather than efforts to gather and update analysis at regular intervals to feed into planning cycles.

Providing clear and concise analysis of country context is not enough to effectively shape planning, and without providing a roadmap to help translate analysis into policy and programming, assessments are often dismissed as little more than intellectual exercises. Proponents of assessment tools, particularly those based on political-economy analysis, argue that they were never meant to be a magic bullet, and that there needs to be an acceptance that the results will not meet simplistic explanations. This may be partly a problem of ensuring that objectives are made explicit, and ensuring that expectations of what an assessment is intended to deliver are clearly communicated to all stakeholders (e.g., headquarters and field staff, technical and political experts). But for agencies where the bulk of staff may be technical experts who do not traditionally think of their work in political terms, some mechanisms will inevitably be needed to help translate analysis into recommendations for country strategy and programming. Donors have struggled with how best to make this link.⁵⁵

Thus far, evaluations of the ways assessments are being used generally indicate a bias toward deliverables, over and above the processes associated with undertaking them and implementing recommen-

dations. This may be indicative of institutional priorities to produce measurable results, spend allocated resources and, sometimes, retroactively justify decisions. Especially in cases where assessments are conducted by external consultants, the extent to which they are utilized in program design and strategy seems to depend more on whose desk they land rather than on any systematic process for ensuring that stakeholders think collectively about the implications of the analysis for policies and programs. Some tools, such as the Dutch SGACA, include a one-to-two-day workshop that is intended to provide an opportunity for embassy staff to discuss the implications of the analysis for their programs and plans. Although this does provide a formal setting to discuss the results of the analysis and appears to sensitize staff, it does not guarantee that staff will be any more receptive to the results of the assessment. Even in cases where workshops are part of the process, interviews indicate that an assessment still has the greatest influence on country plans when field staff is convinced of its usefulness and when the timing of the assessment coincides with a new planning cycle.

The disconnect between assessment and planning is further compounded by a lack of clarity as to the end users of an assessment. Guidance documents typically describe end users of assessments in generic terms as “field” and/or “headquarters” staff with bilateral and multilateral partners and the partner country sometimes also being listed as end users. As a result, it is often unclear how assessments are shared within donor bureaucracies in terms of format, routing, and prioritization of information. This means that there is a risk that analysis may not be adequately absorbed by or even circulated among key decision-making personnel, unless they make an effort to get hold of the information, believe that it is important enough to focus on, and are receptive to findings that may challenge or contradict their own thinking.

A related challenge is that the line between assessment and planning is often blurry and contested. This comes up predominantly in interagency planning processes where the division of

54 UK Department for International Development (DFID), “Political Economy Analysis How-To Note,” DFID practice paper, July 2009.

55 For example, USAID has prepared a series of “Conflict Toolkits” on thematic issues that offer a discussion of the relationship between each topic and conflict, and guidance in developing programs based on the result of a conflict assessment. Topics include peace processes; religion, conflict, and peacebuilding; livelihoods and conflict; women and conflict; etc.

roles may be unclear and different agencies have different expectations regarding the extent to which the assessment should point to planning options. The common use of external consultants to conduct assessments can also be problematic in this regard. Some interviewees expressed discomfort with external consultants participating in internal planning, leading to a division between an assessment exercise and the planning process it is meant to support.

THE INTERAGENCY CONUNDRUM

As we noted above, interagency assessments are becoming increasingly common as whole-of-government approaches and integrated or joined-up planning and implementation are promoted. Four of the five factors we have identified relate to process—i.e., *how* the assessment is undertaken. Our analysis suggests that process is even more important where an assessment is used to help different actors agree on a basic understanding of the situation as the basis for a common strategy. As such, the issues described above are particularly pertinent, and made even more complex, in interagency settings.

In addition, there are several other challenges and risks related to interagency assessments that emerged through our interviews. In some cases there is a lack of agreement as to which entities should be engaged in political analysis. While there is a growing recognition that development is fundamentally a political enterprise and that engagement in fragile situations is inherently political, there is still some resistance—both internal and external—to the idea of development actors engaging in this area.

Whole-of-government approaches are still in their infancy and continue to face basic problems of communication and information flow. Basic issues such as harmonized information-technology systems and clear, efficient protocols for dealing with classified information need to be addressed. Each agency will have lines that cannot be crossed, especially with regard to intelligence data, but these lines can be more easily managed if they are understood in advance.

Discussions at the experts' workshop highlighted that using assessments as a vehicle to promote whole-of-government or integrated decision making risks privileging the mechanics of the tool

rather than the quality of information and analysis produced. Such processes may risk papering over important differences through interagency negotiation. Genuine debate and hard choices in terms of the prioritization and sequencing of interventions may lose out to interagency turf battles. This tendency also has important implications for the assessment team. Privileging the mechanics of the tool creates a tendency to staff assessment teams with individuals that are experienced in the use of the tool, rather than putting a premium on country knowledge or the other skills and competencies highlighted above.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the last ten to fifteen years, international actors have continually refined their tools and approaches to address the challenge of understanding local context. From the earlier conflict and governance assessment tools to newer political-economy analysis and fragility tools, donors have sought new ways to understand the drivers and mitigators of conflict, and to uncover the underlying dynamics that drive relationships of power at multiple levels of state and society. Recognizing that context must be the starting point for all interventions, the drive to develop and refine assessment tools has been critical to fostering increased sensitivity to context.

However, despite considerable attention to and investment in assessment tools, our findings indicate that the extent to which the analysis they produce influences decision making, policy, or programming is mixed. The extent of assessments' impact appears to be determined by five key factors: clarity of purpose; timing and timeframes; interests and incentives; people and competencies; and the linkage between assessment and planning. These factors speak to the decision-making needs of policymakers and other high-level officials, the bureaucratic and political circumstances under which assessments are conducted and analysis received, and the process by which assessments are conducted. These findings point to a few broad recommendations that emerged through our interviews and in discussions at the expert's workshop.

1. Be realistic about what assessments can accomplish.

The use of assessments has to be situated within

the broader universe of political analysis that informs decision making, much of which is done informally. It is worth asking whether shortcomings in international responses are really due to lack of knowledge about and understanding of the context, or due to other (primarily political) obstacles. Would improved analysis of context really translate into better decision making in conflict-affected and fragile environments, given all of the strategic priorities and political imperatives that drive decisions about international engagement and foreign aid? If the aim is to strengthen international actors' understanding of local context, instruments such as formal assessment tools represent only one way to capture this type of knowledge, and should be supported by other methods. Moreover, international actors are often criticized for employing an overly technocratic approach to conflict-affected and fragile states: it is important to ensure that political analysis in the form of assessments does not become another box to tick.

There is a tendency to think that, on the strength of better analysis, international actors will be able to design better interventions. However, good analysis does not always point to solutions. More often, a truly nuanced analysis reveals the limitations of donor options and helps policymakers realize how constrained they are. This is highlighted by the Dutch experience in conducting a SGACA in Uganda, where the analysis led the embassy to conclude that the previous multiannual strategic plan was both insufficiently critical of what was happening “behind the façade” in Uganda, and at the same time too ambitious. Instead, they concluded that their “circle of interest was much bigger than [their] circle of influence” and ended up limiting their focus to the two sectors where Dutch policy objectives aligned with those of the Ugandan government (education and justice).⁵⁶

2. Ensure that assessments are linked more consistently to an overarching planning cycle.

The drive to understand context has produced many important developments in terms of assessment tools and processes. But this has

come at the expense of systematic attention to planning cycles, and the role of assessments therein. Ideally, assessments should inform planning and implementation, followed by robust monitoring and evaluation of impact, with the ability to make midcourse corrections or respond to new opportunities or constraints posed by in-country developments. Although our findings indicate that some assessments are required as part of regular programming cycles, they often miss the mark due to inopportune timing. Even where assessments are linked to planning, there is a lack of mechanisms to revisit initial assessments when country strategies and programs are updated, or in later planning cycles. In some cases, as in a conflict assessment conducted in a crisis situation, it may not be possible to integrate findings into a formal planning process. However, this should be the exception rather than the rule. Too often linkages to planning processes do not occur because of lapses in foresight and poor management.

Effective presentation of material is essential to ensure that good analysis is fed into planning and decision-making processes. If material is not presented in a way that is “user friendly” or easily accessible to busy policymakers and practitioners who have multiple responsibilities and limited time, then the utility of the analysis is diminished. In many cases, assessments are considered “too academic” or analysis is presented in such a way that staff feels it cannot be easily translated into concrete options. Here, the practice of workshops as the final stage in the assessment process is key, so that those tasked with implementing aid programs are required to reflect on the findings of the assessment and implications for country strategy and programs. However, efforts should be made to ensure that the process is not perceived as overly headquarters-driven.

Donors should develop clear protocols that set out how the results of an assessment should feed into planning or programming, what is the appropriate link to monitoring and evaluation, and how to disseminate the results of assess-

⁵⁶ Joop Hazenberg, “The SGACA Experience: Incentives, Interests and Raw Power—Making Development Aid More Realistic and Less Technical,” in *A Rich Menu for the Poor: Food for Thought on Effective Aid Policies*, The Hague: Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009.

ments to avoid their becoming one-off exercises. Fostering greater clarity on who are the end users of assessments, their information needs, and how to target and convey information in a way that it can be readily fed into planning and decision-making processes could also ensure that assessments are more effectively used. This means that it may be necessary to present information differently in terms of length, format, and the focus of the analysis, depending on the end user.

Interagency or whole-of-government planning processes (including assessment, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation) are becoming more and more common in fragile situations. They suffer from many of the same challenges as single-agency assessments, but they also present unique obstacles where the goal is to find a common understanding of the situation and to devise a strategy that draws on the assets of each entity or actor. Our interviews suggest that a complete consensus is not realistic. In these cases, the fundamental challenge seems to be devising a process that draws on each actor's assets and perspectives and manages to build consensus around a basic understanding of the situation and the implications for a coherent and coordinated response. There is also a need to ensure that the assessment is linked to a dynamic planning process that can be modified as new information and analysis become available.

Whole-of-government processes are still in their infancy and are characterized by a great deal of experimentation and innovation. Our interviews and discussions indicated that donor governments are keen to reflect on their early experience, especially with respect to assessment and planning, and learn from others that are engaged in similar efforts. This seems a fruitful area for further research which could point to practical lessons and guidance based on donors' early experiences.

3. Shift the focus from tools to developing a culture analysis.

International actors must guard against excessive focus on the tools themselves, to the neglect of ensuring that political analysis is streamlined throughout development-agency

thinking. Over time, the focus needs to shift from the tools to promoting a culture of analysis. This has implications for recruitment and training of staff, as well as the importance of cultivating multiple sources of information and analysis locally and internationally. Drawing on the thinking inherent in political-economy analysis, practitioners could be trained and incentivized to gather and analyze information on a regular basis. The goal would be to promote an analytical culture, whereby staff is encouraged to "think politically" so that strategies, programs, and day-to-day implementation are regularly informed by contextual information.

Existing assessment tools will continue to be valuable as frameworks to guide analysis, especially in terms of understanding conflict factors and the dynamics of fragility and resilience, but the emphasis should shift from the mechanics of the tools to the way staff approach their work. A first step is to shift the focus to developing guidelines to assist practitioners in gathering knowledge, understanding changing political dynamics, and organizing and presenting their knowledge in a form that is helpful to decision makers.

In many cases this is already underway, either because individual supervisors have encouraged this kind of approach among their staff, or through the development of guidance, as highlighted above. However, promoting a culture of analysis requires much more systematic support and investment, including through:

- Developing guidelines for translating analysis into policy and programming;
- Training staff in political-economy analysis;
- Staffing-up in the field to ensure individual officers have the time to gather and analyze information regularly;
- Prioritizing country knowledge over thematic expertise, for example by making field rotations mandatory for promotion within the organization, or by extending the minimum time spent in overseas posts;
- Avoiding organizational stove-piping between analytical and operational staff;
- Encouraging rotations through different departments and agencies, for example through the use of secondments;

- Ensuring systematic information-sharing among development, diplomatic, and military (where appropriate) staff in the field and at headquarters, many of whom monitor country situations on a regular basis, but may not have a comprehensive picture of the situation; and
- Cultivating multiple sources of information locally and internationally, for example by supporting local think tanks, universities, or polling companies, as well as building a network of international experts with country and issue-specific knowledge that can be drawn upon regularly.

The advantage of this approach is that it could address some of the obstacles related to timing and incentives that limit the impact of assessments. Fostering a culture of analysis may reduce the need for formal assessment exercises, instead allowing staff to modify programs based on real-time analysis, as well as enabling them to feed into time-sensitive decision making.⁵⁷ Formal assessments may still be required for a variety of reasons, but they could be made more flexible in terms of format and duration by drawing more readily on staff knowledge as well as local sources of analysis and information. By placing a premium on ongoing context analysis, agencies can help create incentives for staff to engage in analysis, participate in formal assessments when and if they are required, and be more open to considering the implications of the analysis produced by assessments. Enhanced opportunities for career advancement and

greater financial compensation could incentivize staff to adapt their thinking and contribute to a normative shift in the culture of donor agencies. Promoting a culture of analysis would require commitment from the very top in the form of bureaucratic and political will to respond to new information, even when it suggests a significant departure from the status quo.

Overall, our findings indicate that donor experience with assessment tools has fostered increasing sensitivity to context. Successive iterations of conflict and governance assessment tools have produced increasingly nuanced frameworks for understanding the dynamics of fragility and resilience and their interaction with external interventions. However, the pendulum may have swung too far in favor of formal assessment tools. The development of these tools has overshadowed much-needed attention to how assessments feed into broader decision-making and planning processes, and the mechanics of assessment processes have been privileged at the expense of developing a culture of analysis and cultivating multiple sources of information and diagnostics. It may be time to allow the pendulum to swing back to the center by refocusing on developing a culture of political analysis and creating mechanisms to allow that analysis to feed into time-sensitive decision making and planning.

⁵⁷ This may be easier to achieve in agencies with decentralized decision making, where field offices operate with relative autonomy in making programming decisions.

Annex: Initial Mapping of Assessment Tools

Assessment tools and frameworks used by bilateral and multilateral donors that were covered by initial desk research during October 2008 – January 2009:

European Commission

1. Check-list for Root Causes of Conflict
2. Conflict Prevention Assessment Framework

Germany

3. The Catalogue of Criteria
4. Conflict Analysis for Project Planning and Management

Netherlands

5. Stability Assessment Framework
6. Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis
7. Fragile States Assessment Methodology

Sweden

8. The Manual for Conflict Analysis
9. Power Analysis

Switzerland

10. Key Questions for Context Analysis

United Kingdom

11. Strategic Conflict Assessment
12. Country Governance Analysis
13. Drivers of Change
14. Countries at Risk of Instability Framework

United Nations

15. UN Common Country Assessment
16. UN Common Inter-Agency Framework for Conflict Analysis
17. UN Strategic Assessment
18. UNDP Conflict-Related Development Analysis

United States

19. Conflict Assessment Framework
20. Democracy and Governance Strategic Assessment Framework
21. Fragile States Assessment Framework (not operationalized)
22. Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework

World Bank

23. Conflict Analysis Framework
24. Post-Conflict Needs Assessment and Transitional Results Framework (with UNDP)

Assessment tools and frameworks developed by nongovernmental organizations and agencies:

CARE

25. Benefits/Harms Handbook

Collaborative for Development Action (CDA)

26. Do No Harm Framework for Analyzing the Impact of Assistance on Conflict

Conflict Prevention and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (CPR) Network

27. Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment

FEWER, International Alert, and Saferworld

28. Conflict Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and Peacebuilding:
A Resource Pack

The following global fragility indices were also examined in a related subproject conducted in January – May 2009 in a workshop at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). Research was conducted by Vanna Chan, Ellena Fotinatos, Joyce Pisarello, Liat Shetret, and Melissa Waits, under the overall supervision of Ariel Lublin. Findings were delivered to IPI in an unpublished report: International Peace Institute SIPA Capstone Workshop: Assessing Post-Conflict and Fragile States – Evaluating Donor Frameworks: Final Report (May 2009):

1. Brookings, Index of State Weakness in the Developing World
2. Carleton University, Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) Fragility Index
3. Fund for Peace, Failed State Index
4. George Mason University, State Fragility Index
5. World Bank, Country Policy and Institutional Assessment / International Development Association Resource Allocation Index (IRAI)

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777 United Nations Plaza New York, NY 10017-3521 USA

TEL +1-212 687-4300 FAX +1-212 983-8246

www.ipinst.org