Research Brief:
Trust in the State and Peacebuilding

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In recent years, (re)establishing functioning state institutions in fragile and peripheral conflict contexts has been recognised as a crucial aspect of peacebuilding. The quality of peace achieved via peace accords, for example, depends on how the accords are implemented, which, in most cases, is led by the state. Additionally, in many conflict and post-conflict contexts, a weak state presence is an underlying causal factor in the violence, and/or state capacity may have been debilitated by war. Thus, statebuilding and peacebuilding often go hand in hand. While the focus of much post-conflict peacebuilding is on designing inclusive and "locally owned" processes, the underlying challenges of **broken and distrusting state-society relations** for implementing peacebuilding projects and policies are rarely addressed. Therefore, this month's Research Brief discusses possible adaptation strategies for institutions involved in peace and statebuilding interventions in distrusting environments by highlighting ways their personnel can work to rebuild trust.

(Re)establishing the state in a post-conflict society and increasing its capacity to deliver reliable services is the basis for (re)constructing a trusting and legitimate social contract between government, state institutions and citizens. This, however, tends to be a highly protracted transformation that often follows decades of neglect or violent intrusion by the state, and non-state actors carrying out state functions instead, from civil society organisations to armed groups and tribal authorities. As a result, the outset of the state's institutional peacebuilding efforts is both its most critical and its most challenging stage. The success of early interventions is critical as it shapes lasting perceptions about the state's compliance with commitments to peace, security, and territorial inclusion, among other goals – and perceptions matter, because citizens' uptake of state services depends on them, and therefore, so does their legitimacy. At the same time, it is particularly difficult to gain this trust and foster alliances with populations in a context that is still largely defined by the ruptured state-society relations of the conflict period.

The stakes of initial state interventions for peace depend considerably on those who give this effort its human face: the government officials who work with communities and civil society on the ground. People's myriad perceptions of the state, which depend on local context and history, are projected onto them. People may have perceptions of the state as an abstract trans-historical entity; perceptions of the incumbent government and its public figures such as presidents or ministers; perceptions of the specific institution a given official represents; and perceptions of the individual official themselves, depending on their personality, cultural characteristics, and ability to establish rapport with local communities. It is common for people to lump all state entities into a homogenised whole, 'the state', in their perceptions. State officials may feel unfairly judged when accused of being complicit in human rights violations purely because they work for a state institution: communities who have suffered violence at the hands of the state may not differentiate past actions by the state from new officials who promise things are different now, nor disaggregate state institutions such as the army from civilian institutions.

Those state officials interacting with local communities – whether locally based or visiting a territory for a short period – have the potential to build trusting state-society relations despite unfavorable historical precedents. However, they face the challenge of having people's perceptions about the state or the government projected onto them, which can undermine their attempts to foster constructive state-society alliances. Hence, peacebuilding staff needs to be sensitised to their positionality in a given environment and learn how to leverage the (dis)trust they and their institutions are subject to. An institutional approach to (re)building a trusting state-society conscious of the aforementioned challenges may thus be guided by the following considerations:

Hiring practices for individuals who are going to be the 'face of the state' on the ground in post-conflict contexts should bear in mind that the messenger matters as much as the message. Often, it is easier for sceptical communities to build trust with a state official who is *like them* in some way – someone from their region, ethnicity, or religion, or, in the case of sector-specific interventions, someone from a shared professional background, e.g. the armed forces or the business sector, who can speak their language and understand their interests and concerns.

Implementing social, political, and historical **context training** for state officials can facilitate empathy to the experiences and quotidian reality of local communities. Context training should have a special focus on local perceptions of the state, especially those induced by violent actions perpetrated by state entities. Rebuilding trust requires officials to understand these strong resentments and the fact that people do not always disaggregate state agencies, actions, and temporalities. Context training should also incorporate a focus on local politics, which may also impact the opinions people have about the state. Even if a given institution is not directly collaborating with local government, an awareness of the local politics is crucial, as this will inevitably shape the state-society relationship resulting from any intervention. Officials involved in workshops and capacity-building should also receive public speaking training, as bureaucratic jargon and technical language can alienate audiences and hinder effective communication.

Building long-term partnerships between state officials and local communities can help to foster trust in state-society relationships. This is a dual challenge: first, it is incumbent upon state officials to build personal connections that foster mutual empathy between them and their constituencies. This can be difficult given the often overcommitted and under-resourced conditions that many public employees face in peacebuilding contexts. Second, these processes must be institutionalised to survive administrational turnover. It is thus recommended to revisit the roles and responsibilities assigned to bureaucrats to ensure that dedicated time for relationship-building is integrated into both performance expectations and evaluations for institutional performance.

It is also essential to recognise that no state institution operates in isolation, and **institutional efforts should be coordinated with other institutions** to avoid inefficiency, inefficacy, and even contradictory policies and programmes. Changing negative perceptions of the state requires time and effort and depends on how people interpret the actions of the government or the state beyond the actions of a specific official or institution. This can help to make the state more legible and nuanced to those citizens who tend to see it in more homogenous terms.

Rebuilding Trust in State-Society Relations

The graphic below showcases five causes for widespread and systemic distrust in the state and five corresponding responses to fix broken state-society relationships. All of these are ways to **rebuild trust** in state-society relations and improve perceptions of the state among local population by meaningfully adjusting state- and peacebuilding interventions to local circumstances through **improved and more consistent communication and engagement strategies.**

Causes for widespread and systemic distrust in the state

Weak state presence as an underlying cause for conflict…

State institutions debilitated by protracted violence…

The social contract delegitimised through governance failures…

Violent intrusion by the state against citizens and civil societies…

Rise of non-governmental (armed groups, grassroots) governance capabilities to substitute state functions…

Recommended Responses

…demands that local-level officials commit to reversing these conditions through a substantive, consistent, and reliable presence and meaningful community engagement. This includes training officials on the sociohistorical conditions of society-state relations in their districts.

…requires peacebuilding and statebuilding to operate in tandem in order to achieve sustainable outcomes by strengthening local-national communication, planning, and coordination capabilities. This can improve the efficacy of limited technical, relational, and financial capital and lay the groundwork for more consistent engagement between state and civil society actors.

…necessitates local relationship-building to facilitate humanising and individualising "the state" in context. This can include hiring practices that better reflect population profiles and thus more easily cultivate rapport between personnel and the population.

…calls for recognition, restoration, and commitments to non-repetition. Advances can be made by highlighting the rupture between prior administrations and state actors and current ones while supporting meaningful engagement at the interpersonal level between new officials, citizens and civil society.

…requires building confidence in the state's capacity to deliver reliable services while fostering long-term alliances between state officials and non-armed civil society associations that recognise local leadership, and develop pertinent, contextualised solutions.