



September 2016

## Navigating International Aid in Transitions: A Guide for Recipients

### OVERVIEW

Helping countries emerge from dictatorship or war has become a central activity of international aid providers. There has been enormous growth in the number of organisations involved, each offering a large and usually bewildering array of programs. But this aid has often been difficult for recipients to understand or use effectively, and aid providers' motives are often questioned. Are these governments and organisations really there to help, or are they engaged in a land grab while a country's politics are up in the air? Do they favour real democracy and peacebuilding, or are they trying to install their friends in power? Is money paid to consultants and for conferences well spent? The main aim of this guide is to help those on the receiving end to make more sense of the varied actors, their motivations, their assumptions and their methods, in order to achieve better results on the ground in the aftermath of war or repression.

At the onset of a transition, Western aid providers often speak with confidence about how democracy and peace can be achieved, and present a burgeoning list of priorities for getting there—from organising elections and jumpstarting political party development, to building the rule of law, fostering women's participation, launching transitional justice initiatives, and implementing ex-combatant reintegration. Yet, it quickly becomes apparent that these international offers of assistance come with matching requests: for close relationships to key players in the transition, knowledge about what is happening on the ground, help in getting assistance operations underway, and "tied" commercial trade expectations. As such, what initially seems an international celebration of the promise and opportunity of transition can quickly take the appearance of an unseemly scramble by outsiders for contacts, contracts, and influence. Strains start to show between assistance providers who are constantly asking for meetings and pressing for quicker results, and recipients who complain of the failure to appreciate and adapt to the political and practical constraints under which they operate.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the aid world makes little effort to explain to people in transitional countries many basic elements of how such assistance operates, why it is on offer, and what effects it can have. Aid providers seem to assume—usually incorrectly and unfairly—that people in a transitional country will know what the assistance is about and how to work effectively with its vast cast of suppliers.

This guide seeks to help overcome this problem by explaining—for the benefit of governmental and nongovernmental recipients—two particular types of assistance: aid for democracy building and aid for peacebuilding. Because these are newer forms of assistance compared to socioeconomic and humanitarian aid, they are often less familiar to institutions and people in countries undergoing transitions. In addition, because they are more directly political—engaging political actors and institutions, sometimes including armed groups, on sensitive issues—they tend to trigger greater concerns and misunderstandings than other areas of assistance.

This guide's premise is that greater knowledge about the transition assistance industry can help well-intentioned actors on the receiving end to engage with it more skilfully, and thus increase the chances that such aid will effectively support lasting peace and democracy. In particular, with well-informed recipients, aid providers' oft-repeated and oft-broken resolutions on coordination, partnership, local ownership, sustainability and much else, will stand a better chance of materialisation—advancing the goal of aid effectiveness to the benefit of all.