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Navigating International Aid in Transitions

A Guide for Recipients



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Preface / Why This Guide?

A dictatorship falls and a society that has long endured repression moves toward democracy. A civil war ends and hope emerges in a battered country for lasting peace and a new political order. Such moments of potentially major change are imbued with optimism. They present a rare opportunity for achieving goals that previously seemed unimaginable. Yet, such transitions are fraught with unexpected obstacles and complexity.

Part of the challenge is the rapid arrival of large numbers of Western aid providers offering help. Representatives of a bewildering array of organisations engaged in international assistance—government aid agencies, intergovernmental organisations, and private organisations—descend on these countries. Insisting on their good intentions and value as partners, these outsiders offer loans, grants, expert consultants, conferences, training seminars, study tours abroad, project collaborations, analytic reports, and much else.

They 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. Economic transformation is also often high on the transitional agenda, whether because a country attempting to move from dictatorship to democracy is also trying to shift to a more market-driven and less corrupt system, or because it has suffered widespread economic destruction during civil war and is seeking basic reconstruction and job creation.

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.

In such situations, it is natural for the people of the transitional country—to whom this guide primarily is addressed—to have many questions about the sudden mushrooming of foreigners coming to help. Who are they all? Why are they here? What are their true interests and motivations? What are they offering, and with what strings attached? And is there a way to turn their offers of support into something of lasting local benefit? These questions are likely to be particularly intense in the early stage of the transition, when assistance is first rushing in. However, they often haunt the assistance provider-recipient relationship for years—in extreme cases, becoming associated with the corruption that fuels state dysfunction or breeds insurrection.

It is 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 trying to explain—for the benefit of local governmental and nongovernmental aid recipients—the Western aid machine that lands in their countries in periods of transition. The aim is to help recipients of transition assistance better understand the way the industry operates so that they may find ways to ensure that their vision is supported, rather than hindered, by assistance providers. In particular, the guide aims to clarify the kinds of organisations offering such assistance, their motivations and interests, the forms of assistance they offer, the theories of change on which their actions are based, and the sorts of operational issues that arise most frequently in practice.

In doing so, the guide encompasses issues that arise in places where transition assistance has passed through more than once (e.g., Ukraine, Haiti) or is arriving for the first time (e.g., Tunisia, Libya); where it has been unusually intense (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq) or less so (e.g., Peru, Ivory Coast); and where there has been a long history of exposure to Western aid systems in general (e.g., Egypt, Pakistan) or comparatively limited prior exposure (e.g., Mauritania, Myanmar). It does so on the recognition that any transition produces new groups of actors seeking funding or other benefits.

Although the range of types of assistance flowing into transitional countries is wide, this guide focuses on two in particular: aid for democracy building and aid for peacebuilding. Because these are relatively newer areas of assistance compared to socioeconomic and humanitarian aid, which have been very widely practiced internationally since at least the 1950s, they are often less familiar to institutions and people in countries suddenly undergoing transitions. In addition, because they are more directly political—engaging political actors and institutions, sometimes including armed groups, on quite sensitive issues—they often trigger greater concerns and misunderstandings than other areas of assistance.

Thus, when we refer throughout this guide to “transition assistance”, we are focusing on only two key areas of the overall domain of assistance that Western actors commonly covers in transition contexts. Nevertheless, we believe that many of the observations and suggestions put forward here, especially concerning how people on the receiving end of assistance can work more productively with aid providers, apply reasonably well across the full spectrum of assistance—from classic development aid, to humanitarian assistance, to statebuilding support.

Based on our combined 60 years of experience with Western assistance in dozens of transitional countries in the world, this guide proceeds from the assumption that aid is neither wonderful nor terrible. It is sometimes helpful and sometimes harmful. Above all, our conviction is that greater knowledge and tools on the part of those on the receiving side can appreciably improve the results of national transitions.

Of course, many things need to happen for transitions to succeed. International assistance alone will not be a determining factor, as the fate of transitions is primarily dependent on the people and institutions of the countries attempting change—who may be equally or more divided than those arriving from the outside. Yet, if well-intentioned actors within transitional countries can seek and receive external assistance in more skilful ways, they will be more likely to make it a constructive factor in support of lasting peace and democracy in their country. In that sense, this guide seeks to help *achieve*, not complicate, aid effectiveness. Its primary purpose is to orient, not critique.

What We Mean by Transitions and Transition Assistance

We use the term “transitions” to refer to historical junctures when a country is emerging out of a protracted period of dictatorial rule and/or civil war and is attempting to move toward more democratic rule and/or peace. Many types of events can trigger transitions: a citizen-led uprising, an external intervention, the death of a longstanding ruler, a negotiated peace deal, or the creation of a new state, to name the most prevalent possibilities. Yet, if the trigger of a transition is usually identifiable, the ending point rarely is. That issue is best answered by the people of the particular country.

We use the term “transition assistance” to refer to the specialised component of the more general universe of international aid that is targeted at facilitating successful transitions. Led overwhelmingly by Western organisations and countries (primarily OECD member countries), such assistance has been mobilised in dozens of countries around the world over the last 35 years. It encompasses both financial assistance (e.g., grants, loans, and budget support) and technical assistance (e.g., seminars, training, and policy advice).

1 / The Global Context of Transition Assistance

Examples of international assistance to democratic and post-conflict transitions go back at least as far as the U.S. Marshall Plan that aimed to foster economic recovery, social stabilisation and political liberalisation in Western Europe after World War II. Yet, as an organised and visible industry, such assistance did not really form and spread until the mid to late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. At that time, the world was experiencing a double surge of transitions. One arose in the large number of countries—especially in South America, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union—where authoritarian governments were giving way to attempted democratic transitions. The other arose in a diverse swath of countries—such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala in Central America, Mozambique and Angola in southern Africa, Cambodia in Asia, and Lebanon in the Middle East—that were experiencing the end of civil wars.

When this double surge occurred, Western countries wanted to offer their support—and creating new assistance programs focused on democracy and peacebuilding (alongside the aid offered in support of economic transition and humanitarian relief) was an important part of their response. Principal among their motivations was the broad notion that it would be in both their own and the transitional country's best interests for the transitions to succeed.

Many Western bilateral aid agencies, such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), established new departments devoted to democratisation programs. The United Nations and other intergovernmental organisations, such as the Organization for American States (OAS) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), did likewise. Many entirely new aid organisations specialising in supporting democratisation also came into being, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. On the peacebuilding side, Western donors created conflict units within their aid agencies, while also funding the creation of scores of new international NGOs and specialised peacebuilding units at the UN and other intergovernmental organisations.

By the start of the 2000s, approximately ten per cent of overseas development assistance (ODA) was explicitly devoted to democracy support and peacebuilding. Although this figure may sound relatively low, given that ODA totals over \$100 billion annually, even ten per cent of it represents many billions of dollars of programming per year, translating into hundreds of organisations engaged in such work in thousands of projects around the world at any one time (as described in more detail in later chapters).

Fading Optimism, But Persistence

Initially, this new domain of assistance embodied considerable optimism. Western aid providers were excited to play an influential role in supporting democracy and peace in transitional countries, and were confident in the self-important assumption that as outsiders they *could* play such a role.

Yet, in many cases, people on the receiving end perceived the approach as arrogant and ignorant of their transition's complex starting conditions and power dynamics. Moreover, as the focus of Western assistance moved beyond Europe and Latin America to regions with vastly different religious and cultural traditions, far weaker institutions and much lower social cohesion, providers faced growing criticism for simplistically assuming that every transition to democracy or peace would follow a common sequence.

These criticisms deepened when the overall spread of successful transitions slowed. For example, in contrast to the democratic boom of the 1990s, little to no increase in the number of democracies took place in the first decade of the 2000s. Instead, many countries attempting democratic transitions in this period went off track. In some cases (e.g., Russia), there was the near complete reversal of a democratic opening. Equally, in most Central Asian and some African countries, transitions came full circle as old authoritarian structures reasserted control after openings that initially looked like opportunities to move away from repressive rule. In addition, in parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia, new democratic institutions established in place of old authoritarian ones struggled to improve socioeconomic and security conditions and lost public credibility as a result.

A similar cooling of early optimism occurred with regard to peacebuilding, as a trend of overall decline in the number of civil wars was gradually replaced by one of resurgent or frozen conflict in many regions (e.g., parts of Central Africa and the former Soviet Union) and a rise in violent organised crime at the end of armed conflict in others (e.g., parts of Central America and West Africa). These disappointing trends have only intensified with time. In Africa, recent examples include Sudan's unresolved conflict in South Kordofan, Nigeria's war against the Boko Haram insurgency, and Burundi's incremental slide back into conflict. In Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, organised crime has virtually taken over the state. And in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Middle East has been overwhelmed by civil wars and breakdowns in state structures—rather than increased peace and democracy—in places such as Syria, Libya and Yemen.

These and other discouraging trends have made it painfully evident that the early results of a transition are reversible and that quick injections of technical knowledge and comparative experience have only modest effects. In recent years, the hugely problematic, albeit anomalous, experiences of Western involvement in the transitions of Iraq and Afghanistan have especially reinforced this discomforting awareness.

Yet, scepticism about the reach and impact of Western transition assistance is on the rise due to other factors too. One of these is the shift in power from the West to “the rest.” Various non-Western countries, democratic and non-democratic alike, increasingly play a role in trying to shape transitional outcomes—both through assistance as well as military and diplomatic means—challenging the place of the traditional Western assistance community. For example, Brazil, India, and Turkey have all become donors and provide assistance in transitional contexts (e.g., Turkey in Egypt and Tunisia in recent years, and India in Afghanistan and Nepal). Similarly, in parts of the Middle East, Islamic charities have become important donors, while Gulf Arab state assistance has outpaced that of the United States and Europe since 2011. Meanwhile, Russian actions to affect transitions have become significant in Moldova, Ukraine and other countries in its immediate neighbourhood, just as China's role in transitions in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere in Asia has attracted increased attention.

Alongside these developments, there is the emergence of multilateral aid structures such as the New Development Bank (more often known as the “BRICS Bank”) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The BRICS Bank is a development bank run by Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa, while the AIIB is a Chinese-led funder of new construction in Asia. Although both banks are still only emergent, their establishment signals that Western aid providers can no longer presume that they will remain the most influential actors in the places where transition assistance is provided.

A further trend undercutting the weight of Western aid is the reduced prestige of the Western political and economic model. Transition assistance was initially based on the self-confident view that the West had in essence solved the major political, social, and economic challenges involved in creating peaceful, functional democracies. Yet, the West now displays serious shortcomings and instabilities—from persistent economic crisis in Europe and high levels of political polarisation and gridlock in the United States, to growing intolerance, inequality, and nationalism in both. The earlier notion that the West has answers

while the rest have problems is being replaced by the realisation that everyone has problems, and that some of the problems between the developed and developing worlds are similar in kind and sometimes in degree.

All of this notwithstanding, Western transition assistance remains highly active in dozens of countries. It is still the case that when a former authoritarian or war-torn country begins a transition, a rush of Western aid providers arrives in the country to offer a familiar menu of assistance—with a corresponding imperative to get money and advice out the door. Recent examples include South Sudan, following its comprehensive peace agreement with Sudan in 2005, Myanmar, under its managed democratic transition, and Tunisia, after President Ben Ali fled in early 2011. New targets of transition assistance will continue to arise for many years to come.

Myanmar's Top-Down Transition

Myanmar illustrates some of the complexity of the transition assistance industry.

International sanctions imposed on the country's military regime in the 1990s prevented the country from receiving significant Western aid until 2011, when the junta made way for a transition to a semi-civilian government. Before then, Myanmar had relied on China for most of its grants and loans, using them mainly for military purchases and massive prestige projects such as building a new capital. These were government-to-government arrangements, negotiated in secret and with the money arriving with few strings attached.

The military's political opening, since 2011, arose partly from a desire to balance China's outsized influence on the country and reduce the geopolitical risks of a lagging economy. However, the sudden opening—and the desire of the West to counterbalance or even replace China's long dominant role in the country—made Myanmar particularly vulnerable to an oversupply of transition assistance. Almost overnight, a flood of money and projects surged into a country about which aid providers knew next to nothing before 2011. The World Bank and the IMF had no presence in Myanmar, most embassies had little access to the previous military government, and the majority of outside researchers had no way of working there. As a result, the country experienced many of the typical consequences of a flood of transition aid: confused coordination, astronomic property rents, salary inflation for good staff, the hollowing out of an already weak civil service, widespread confusion about the aims and ambitions of aid providers, and creeping local disillusionment with the overall utility of incoming assistance.

Comparatively speaking, Myanmar's slow and steady, top-down transition is easier for aid providers to engage with than more abrupt changes of government after wars or uprisings. Yet, when the country's transition started, few were aware of the depth of divisions that had been held in check by military rule. As well as being riven by multiple civil conflicts with ethnic minorities, Myanmar was divided between ethnic Burman Buddhist nationalists and minorities, particularly Muslims. Military governments had kept a lid on this by jailing radical monks who tried to stir up religious violence and by heavy censorship of the media. However, when many controls were lifted, new forms of dissent and violence emerged, for which assistance providers were poorly prepared as most of them had viewed Myanmar's problems through the lens of democracy promotion rather than conflict resolution. As such, one of the first things donors funded was a poorly designed and implemented census, which ended up raising tensions unnecessarily at a time when political and ethnic competition was intensifying.

As the transition to civilian rule got underway, the government launched a peace process aimed at resolving decades of internal conflict involving several ethnic armed groups. Within a short time, scores of Western conflict-resolution NGOs set up in Yangon, even though many had no history there or relevant expertise. The government tried to coordinate assistance to the peace process through an internationally-funded organisation called the Myanmar Peace Center, but their limited number of qualified staff spent as much time in meetings with assistance providers (at the latter's request) as in working on the peace process.

Norway took on a coordinating role in the peace process but Japan, China, and the United States remained mostly aloof from this. Myanmar held many of the groups at arm's length during negotiations to end the complex array of civil conflicts, which proved a wise move given the competition for a seat at the table.

2 / The Actors and Their Motivations: Who Will Come and Why?

The world of international expert assistance in transitional countries defies simple description. To give a basic idea of its scale and complexity, we can imagine a single European state from which expert assistance may be delivered by government ministries (aid, foreign affairs, trade, defence), parliamentary bodies and the local embassy, as well as numerous national think-tanks, specialised NGOs, universities, private firms, professional associations, trade unions, religious bodies, media outlets and individual researchers and consultants. Among developed countries, we can multiply this example by several dozen then add multilateral bodies (from the large UN family and a wide range of regional organisations) as well as transnational actors and emerging economic powers with potentially divergent interests.

Excerpted from [Inside the Transition Bubble: International Expert Assistance in Tunisia](#) (IFIT, 2013)

To anyone confronting the world of transition assistance for the first time, the sheer number and variety of organisations offering help is overwhelming. Their names are often similar, their priorities and programs can be hard to distinguish, and their representatives can sound and look like each other. As such, sorting through some basic differences among the many actors is a crucial first step toward understanding what transition assistance consists of, how it operates, and how best to harness it.

When encountering an unfamiliar organisation engaged in assistance efforts, a good starting question is to ask whether it is governmental, intergovernmental, private or some combination of the three. Below we look at the distinctions between these basic categories, as well as some of the diversity of motivations within and across them, since local frustration and confusion so often arise based on misunderstandings about this.

Governmental Bodies

All wealthy Western countries give international aid. Traditionally, most such aid was handled by agencies dedicated to development work or ministries for economic cooperation—and this remains the case with some countries, such as the United Kingdom (Department for International Development, DFID). Yet, a growing number of donor countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway, have been shifting some or all of their international aid to their foreign ministries. In doing so, they have usually created a special department dedicated to international aid alongside the usual diplomatic programs of the ministry.

This shift away from dedicated aid agencies reflects a deeper questioning within Western societies about one of the original objectives of overseas development assistance: namely, to help promote economic development in other countries. Feeling pressed by their own tight financial straits and other economic concerns, Western publics now ask their politicians harder questions about why their government should continue to spend money helping developing countries—especially when some, like Brazil, China, and India, seem to be economic rivals or even threats. The case is even harder to make when aid does not obviously help advance concrete foreign-policy interests, such as security or commercial trade, in response to donor country fears of foreign-sponsored terrorism and public discontent with low economic growth. Moving aid into the foreign ministry, where the core foreign policy interests of the country are handled, is a reflection of this changed thinking.

Beyond aid departments and foreign ministries, other parts of Western governments also carry out aid projects in transitional countries. These include:

- *Finance ministries:* Western finance ministries often send technical advisors to transitional countries, usually to help them manage fiscal affairs and strengthen tax collection and their various economic ministries.
- *Defence ministries:* Western defence ministries have been extensively involved in assistance work abroad, especially in countries where the West has intervened militarily, such as Kosovo, Timor-Leste, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In countries coming out of conflict, defence ministries also often help rebuild domestic security forces through participation in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) programs.
- *Justice ministries:* Western justice ministries sometimes offer assistance related to the rule of law, such as training judges and prosecutors, or working on constitutional and judicial reform programs. This has been prevalent in transitions such as those of Central and Eastern Europe, the former Yugoslavia, and the Great Lakes region of Africa.
- *Parliaments:* Specialised parliamentary committees of Western states (e.g., on foreign affairs or human rights) sometimes play an active role in shaping transition assistance to particular countries. Some parliaments also establish and fund specialised institutions which in turn do significant operational and funding activity in transitional countries (e.g., the United States Institute of Peace, which was established by the U.S. Congress).
- *Embassies:* While some Western countries tightly manage the decision-making of their embassies in transitional countries, others allow for wide discretion and authority in influencing overall foreign policy vis-à-vis the transition (e.g., by deciding on local partnerships, delivering assistance grants, and pushing commercial interests).

MOTIVATIONS OF GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

The issue of why Western governments devote aid to help transitional countries achieve democracy and peace is one that generates much scepticism and questioning by aid recipients. As discussed below, this is especially true in the area of democracy promotion.

National interests

Despite what spokespersons for Western governments sometimes say, their transition assistance is not driven primarily by idealism. Many *individuals* within their ministries and agencies are idealistic about why they do the work they do, but the organisations themselves—being parts of government—aim to serve their countries’ national interests. And while some countries can genuinely claim that idealism has long been a strong factor behind their commitment to international assistance (e.g., Sweden and Ireland), for most countries idealism is a weak factor in the overall calculation of policies.

In general terms, Western governments try to help other countries achieve successful transitions because they believe it is in their own national interest to do so. They assume that peaceful democratic states, having shared political values, will make more compatible diplomatic, security, and economic partners than nondemocratic ones. A commonly held view in Western capitals, for example, is that if Russia’s attempted democratic transition of the 1990s had succeeded, the country would be much friendlier today than it is under President Vladimir Putin. Another common view is that democratic systems, being based on popular consent, will be more stable and peaceful internally, as well as vis-à-vis each other, than authoritarian systems and thus less likely to generate the conditions for mass violence or conflict.

These assumptions have come into question in recent years as many transitions have gone off track and ended in authoritarian relapses or war. Vivid examples include the devastating conflicts in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen after the end of authoritarian regimes. The violence that followed elections in Kenya and Timor-Leste in 2007 and the Ivory Coast in 2010 are other cases that led many to question whether democracy might in fact be a recipe for instability in some parts of the world. As such, a debate has arisen in Western scholarly and policy circles (not for the first time) about whether or not some transitional countries are “ready for democracy” and whether it might not be better to accept authoritarian rule in some places—such as those still in the midst of statebuilding—for the sake of stability.

In similar manner, the outcomes of elections in some countries have generated doubts about the assumption that elections and transitions will necessarily produce governments that are friendly to the West and good for Western economic and security interests. The election during the past ten years of populist, anti-American leaders in some South American countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, are cases in point. Another example is Turkey, which has become a less reliable Western ally under its democratically elected (but increasingly authoritarian) leader than it was under its previous military governments.

Perceived Inconsistencies

Cosy friendships with dictators: Aid recipients rightly ask how one can reconcile stated preferences for democracy and human rights with the fact that major Western powers maintain relations with many undemocratic and repressive regimes (such as the United States with Ethiopia, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, or France with Gabon and Algeria), without insisting such governments pursue democratic change. This seems at odds with the idea that Western governments consider democracy promotion as a national interest.

Yet, nowadays when an authoritarian government falls and an apparent political opening emerges, Western governments most often adapt their position to the new realities, declaring themselves in favour of a democratic transition. They tend to do so no matter how strong their attachment to the prior regime was or how strong the historical or colonial links, appearing willing to shift almost overnight from decades of support for an entrenched authoritarian to championing democratic change, as was the case when Indonesia’s Suharto fell in 1998 or when Egypt’s Mubarak fell in 2011. This can be bewildering to people in the country who are understandably sceptical of the sudden change of heart. However, it can be explained as a redefined national interest in light of abrupt but deep changes on the ground.

Undemocratic interim measures: Some transitions arise through formal negotiation—whether in the form of peace accords aimed at ending a civil war (e.g., Aceh) or political accords to dismantle one-party rule or dictatorship-like circumstances. In such cases, in which there are no clear winners, a fear often exists among Western governments that early elections may aggravate a winner-take-all political pattern and threaten the chances for an inclusive, stable transition. This can lead Western governments to push the parties toward national unity governments (e.g., Kenya) or advocate the creation of caretaker governments (e.g., Libya) that can run government affairs until conditions are more conducive to free and fair nation-wide elections.

However, such temporary arrangements are the exception to Western governments’ general preference for elected governments, and underscore their strong interest in security and political stability. Moreover, these arrangements in no way contradict their general preference for democracy. Instead, Western governments would argue, an interim or national unity government can serve as a valuable bridge of authority until security and political conditions improve.

Persistent Suspicions

Playing favourites: Many on the receiving end of Western democracy programs assume that such efforts are about engineering transitions so that friends of the West come out on top. Yet, most international democracy support does not aim to get particular political actors into power. The core programs that make up the heart of democracy aid—such as political party building, constitutional reform, parliamentary strengthening, civil society development, and elections administration—seek to open up rather than restrict the political landscape, allowing a wider variety of political players to compete and ensuring a more legitimate process by which citizens choose their new leaders. The emphasis is usually on the inclusion of diverse actors and on fairness and transparency in the electoral process.

Certainly, there are cases in which the choice advocated by an international actor for a particular electoral system or calendar clearly favours one side. When the Western role in a country's transition is unusually heavy, such as a military occupation following an armed intervention, Western governments may even be tempted to use their dominant role to shape specific political outcomes. In Iraq, for example, the U.S. government favoured certain political forces and tried (with mixed success) to play the role of kingmaker. Likewise, in Afghanistan, Washington has played an active role in trying to influence the outcome of the various presidential elections since the 2001 ouster of the Taliban. Yet, in most cases, the democracy programs of governmental aid organisations do not seek to tilt the process toward a particular outcome.

Economic motives: Another persistent suspicion of aid recipients (often linked to negative past experiences with colonialism or military intervention) concerns whether Western democracy assistance is largely about trying to import a certain brand of liberal capitalism. Accusations are sometimes made that democracy aid is just a cloak for an underlying economic agenda, such as expanding investment and trade for their own companies, or unfairly advantaging certain elites.

It is certainly true that Western policymakers tend to view democracy and markets as natural partners, and will usually speak of these as mutually reinforcing processes of change. For example, they will say that the establishment of the rule of law through stabilisation and democratisation will make it possible to secure the property rights necessary for a market system. Yet, looking at the patterns of international economic behaviour in transitional countries by Western powers, it is hard to see much evidence for the claim that democracy support is really just a handmaiden of self-serving capitalist expansion. Western governments are as or more likely to be driven by very different kinds of concerns—ranging from effective border control, to preventing the spread of terrorism or combatting transnational crime. Moreover, Western companies, supported by their national governments, continue to invest heavily and sell goods to many countries that are *not* democratic—from China to Kazakhstan to Arab Gulf states.

Interests Inside Governments: The Case of Nepal

Governments in mature democracies often struggle to come up with unified, coherent approaches to transition challenges. Policy is most often made on the fly as a response to sudden events, and in many cases, diverse interests within rival ministries compete to control outcomes.

“Joined-up government” under which aid, diplomatic, and security policy would operate in unison, was one of the central promises of the New Labour administration of Tony Blair. The idea came together most closely in the Conflict Pool, a pot of money jointly administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Department of International Development (DFID) with the aim of preventing violent conflict. All three had to sign off on aid decisions, but more than once the model tested their ability to manage internal differences.

For instance, in Nepal, DFID had been active for decades and tended to view the country through the lens of development rather than conflict. By contrast, the MoD was mainly interested in maintaining close links to the country through its recruitment of Gurkha soldiers, inexpensive and effec-

tive mercenaries hired by the British Army. The FCO, for its part, had to concern itself with appeasing India, a growing trade partner but a sensitive and prickly ally. The result, at key moments, was anything but “joined up”, as seen in the government’s responses to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal in the early 2000s, just prior to the country’s negotiated transition.

Reconciling the priorities of DFID, the MoD, and FCO was almost impossible. DFID wanted to focus on development, even as local government broke down and thousands died in fighting in government and insurgent operations. The MoD tended to favour the views of the Nepali army, which was determinedly royalist and resistant to making peace with the Maoists. The FCO remained focused on respecting India’s position, which decided that it wanted to preserve the power of the army, the one institution that it felt could ensure stability.

In the end, the Conflict Pool heeded the MoD’s position and supported the then Royal Nepal Army in its fight against the Maoists. As one of the more influential ministries, it was able to push through a scheme to provide Ukrainian helicopters to the government.

Although to outsiders, it might have looked as though the UK government had a unified position and single set of interests, the reality was otherwise. When it comes to joined-up government, in most cases, the powerful ministries with primary responsibility for security issues still tend to dominate, particularly when it comes to the allocation of aid among contending priority countries.

Intergovernmental Organisations

Intergovernmental organisations—whose budgets are principally (or sometimes exclusively) funded by the member states that govern them—represent another large category of actors engaged in transition assistance. Including their various internal departments (e.g., the United Nations “family” includes over 30 entities), the number of active intergovernmental organisations is immense.

United Nations family

The United Nations (UN) is usually deeply involved in countries emerging from civil wars—in some cases with a political mission and/or UN Security Council-mandated peace operation responsible for bringing security and supporting the country’s political and economic reconstruction. The UN currently has sixteen peace operations, having carried out dozens in prior decades. Yet, even without special peace mandates, a wide array of UN agencies (e.g., the peacebuilding commission and departments of political affairs, humanitarian affairs, and peacekeeping) may play prominent technical assistance roles in post-conflict countries.

In countries emerging from authoritarian rule (but not from armed conflict), the UN may also be involved—albeit usually less intensively. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) devotes a significant share of its budget to democracy programming, including in transitional contexts, sometimes playing the role of coordinator for work by other donors. Alongside the UNDP, the UN Electoral Assistance Unit is a major actor in the realm of elections work, while the UN Democracy Fund gives direct grants to civil society groups.

Regional organisations

Some regional intergovernmental organisations involve themselves extensively in transitional countries. For example, through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) carries out election observer missions, rule of law assistance, and other forms of political support in member states. The Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) play diplomatic roles in resolving conflicts and political crises that arise in Latin America, as well as assisting in some elections. Organisations such as the African Union do similar work, as do sub-regional bodies such as the South African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which often combine military and political support to stabilise fragile peace processes.

Development banks

The World Bank and regional development banks like the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the African Development Bank, provide a wide range of development assistance in transitional countries. The World Bank in particular has developed considerable expertise and activities relating to post-conflict reconstruction. However, with the exception of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which has the promotion of democracy as one of its core mandates, these banks do not work on democracy programming and their work relating to post-conflict reconstruction generally stays on the socioeconomic side. Though not a development bank, and though exercising strong influence on the prospects of successful transition (e.g., by conditioning loans on social program cutbacks that reduce a transitional government's limited political capital), the IMF has a mandate and culture that, like the others, tends to eschew any discussion of politics.

Other intergovernmental organisations

The number and range of intergovernmental organisations extend well beyond those just mentioned. The European Union—more than just a regional organisation—is a major provider of transition assistance around the world. It offers a full range of financial and technical assistance to both post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts. Beyond the EU, there are hundreds of other specialised intergovernmental organisations operating in transitional countries, ranging from large ones such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), to midsized ones such as the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), International Development Law Organization (IDLO), and Commonwealth Institute.

MOTIVATIONS OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Some people assume that intergovernmental organisations present in their country are merely doing the bidding of Western governments. However, the picture is not nearly so simple.

In general, the interests and motivations of intergovernmental organisations are the product of two balancing acts. The first relates to the fact that different member states of the organisation often try to influence the group's agenda and operation. In the family of UN organisations, for example, Western countries tend to use and enjoy the dominant share of influence. However, this does not necessarily mean they always have their way. For instance, at the World Bank and the IMF, both of which have headquarters in Washington, D.C. and the United States as their biggest shareholder, negotiations and compromise with other governments are required to push through many actions.

A second balancing act is between the member states of an intergovernmental organisation and its staff. The latter may build up its own sense of ownership, mission and methods, independent of those set by member state governments (or in some cases, as a function of explicitly devolved authority). For example, if you ask staff members of UNICEF who determines what they do and how they should work, they will likely have a complicated answer. On the one hand, they will note that member states have an oversight role. At the same time, they will say that the internal management of the organisation, and the program staff, have a major say in shaping the agenda and actions of the organisation. This is likewise true in many regional intergovernmental structures, such as the European Commission or the OSCE.

Yet, the perception that intergovernmental organisations are handmaidens of Western governments is not entirely misplaced. Given the economic, political, and ideological influence of the West, many major intergovernmental organisations have subscribed to the same conventional wisdom as Western governments about how and why to pursue peacebuilding and democracy support. In addition, some Western governments continue to exercise disproportionate influence in selecting the leadership of major intergovernmental organisations like the UN.

Nevertheless, the strength of Western influence should not be overstated. At the UNDP, for instance, China and some other non-Western member states have resisted any emphasis on democracy building programs that they feel are politically challenging for sitting governments. Likewise, the Organisation of American States (OAS) has experienced sharp divisions, as some members believe there have been American efforts to enlist the OAS as a tool of U.S. policy in the region.

Private Organisations

Even larger and more diverse than governmental or intergovernmental bodies is the world of private organisations, which easily number in the thousands. Some of the major categories of organisations active in providing financial and technical assistance in transitional countries include:

- *Humanitarian organisations*, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, the International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps (some of which also do development work);
- *Non-profit development-focused organisations*, such as World Vision and Oxfam;
- *For-profit development consulting firms*, such as Creative Associates, Chemonics, and Development Alternatives;
- *Labour organisations*, such as the International Trade Union Confederation;
- *Election-related organisations*, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the Carter Center;
- *Anticorruption organisations*, such as Transparency International and the Natural Resources Governance Initiative;
- *Human rights organisations*, such as FIDH, the International Center for Transitional Justice and the International Commission of Jurists;
- *Media support organisations*, such as Internews, BBC Media Action, and Deutsche Welle Akademie;
- *Conflict prevention and resolution organisations*, such as International Alert and Search for Common Ground;
- *Political foundations*, such as Germany's Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (which are linked to individual political parties) or the UK's Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (which are multiparty organisations);
- *Private foundations*, such as the Open Society Foundations, the Gates Foundation, and the Robert Bosch Stiftung; and
- *Public foundations*, such as the Fund for Global Human Rights and the Global Fund for Women.

Almost all of these organisations have their headquarters in the West, while the larger ones (mainly international NGOs) also have offices or field presences elsewhere. As to their funding, this typically comes from one or more of four sources:

- *Western governments* (usually aid agencies or foreign ministries). In the next chapter, we discuss what level of operational independence government-funded private organisations have from the governments that fund them.
- *Western private foundations*. While some of these have an operational side to their work, many primarily, or exclusively, do grantmaking.
- *Wealthy individuals and Western publics*. Some organisations receive major gifts from individual philanthropists. Additionally, or alternatively, some rely on mass appeals and campaigns that aggregate thousands of small individual contributions.
- *Fees and sales*. Some organisations charge fees, or sell some of their services or products, as a means to raise revenue—although this is less common among international NGOs involved in democratisation and peacebuilding work.

MOTIVATIONS OF PRIVATE ORGANISATIONS

Private aid organisations vary widely in size, agenda, business model, national government relationships, and much more. However, when discussing motivations, a reasonable first premise is that private organisations primarily serve self-defined interests, establishing and implementing their own mission, method, and areas of priority. In fact, the best-known organisations tend to operate with substantial independence from the governments of the countries where they have headquarters. Some indeed are actively critical of their own governments—for example, major Western human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch pursue their own self-defined human rights mission and are frequently critical of U.S. or other Western policies. Similarly, Transparency International and other groups combatting corruption push Western governments to do more to tackle the issue at home. Many organisations and foundations acting transnationally in other major areas of democracy and peacebuilding support—from media freedom to security system reform, transitional justice and the rule of law—do no less.

In short, most reputable private organisations are straightforward about their purpose and motivations and do not view themselves as part of their government’s foreign policy (despite periodically becoming side-tracked by donor fads). However simplistic it sounds, most are, and believe themselves to be, motivated by personal and institutional ideals.

Nevertheless, when a private organisation is largely funded by a single government, the perception of external control naturally increases. This triggers reasonable questions about whether it should be seen as a proxy of that government, as frequently occurs for example with the U.S. political party institutes active in many transitional countries and primarily funded by the U.S. government. By way of illustration, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) may decide to include certain political parties in a party training program, and people in the country may then interpret this as the U.S. government favouring those parties. Yet, such decisions are most likely based on its own judgment about how best to approach political party development—not on orders from the U.S. government.

Knowing Who You Are Dealing with

It can be surprisingly hard for local aid recipients to determine whether one is dealing with a governmental, intergovernmental, or private actor. Although some cases are clear-cut (e.g., the Ford Foundation’s funds and governance structure are purely private, and the U.S. State Department’s funds and governance structure are purely governmental), many organisations reflect a blend of elements, thus complicating the question of who one is dealing with.

For instance, although UN agencies are generally assumed to be purely intergovernmental entities, many also receive private funds. Although the European Endowment for Democracy is legally registered as a private foundation, a majority of its board consists of acting members of the European Parliament. Similarly, although Interpeace was established by the UN, it later became non-governmental, while nevertheless reserving seats on its governing council for the host government, Switzerland, and a designated representative of the UN Secretary-General. In the same vein, the United States Institute of Peace was established and is funded by the U.S. Congress, but operates as an independent, non-partisan institution.

These are but a few illustrations. As a rule of thumb, in trying to know what type of international actor one is dealing with, the best starting point is usually the organisation’s legally registered form. Beyond that, it can be important to evaluate (1) the share of private, governmental and intergovernmental sources of funding the entity receives, and (2) the percentage, and role, of private individuals versus public officials within its governance structure.

What is a Private Grantmaking Foundation?

The U.S.-based Foundation Center defines a private grantmaking foundation as “a nongovernmental entity that is established as a non-profit corporation or a charitable trust, with a principal purpose of making grants to unrelated organizations, institutions, or individuals for scientific, educational, cultural, religious, or other charitable purposes.” The trustees or directors of such foundations generally manage a principal fund derived from a single family, individual or corporation ([Foundation Center](#)). In the U.S. alone, there are over 87,000 private foundations that control nearly 800 billion USD in assets ([Foundation Center](#)).

Yet, it is hard to know from the name alone what a foundation actually does. For example, most continental European foundations operate like NGOs and do not make grants, whereas most U.S. ones primarily or exclusively issue grants. Similarly, so-called “public foundations” do not have a principal fund of their own, but instead pool funding from external sources (and thus compete with NGOs for private grantmaking resources). Moreover, not every private grantmaking body is even called a foundation (e.g., depending on the jurisdiction and applicable laws, some may be set up as “charities”, “endowments”, or “funds”).

The diversity of private grantmaking foundations extends further still. Some have a living donor who may play a role in setting the direction and spending of the foundation (e.g., the Gates Foundation, which focuses mostly on health and educational issues, is driven by the preferences of Bill and Melinda Gates). In other cases, the original donor is no longer alive (e.g., Carnegie Corporation of New York) and the foundation is run by a professionally-appointed president and independent board of directors who may take the foundation in different directions from what the original donor once intended.

To know more about a particular foundation’s particular size, mission, and governance structure, it can be helpful to start by consulting their website. However, as some websites are deliberately vague, it is also worth examining the foundation’s audited financial statements or tax declarations. In the U.S., private foundations must disclose the names and titles of their officers, trustees and directors, and information about their finances and past grantees in an IRS Form 990-PF. The website [CitizenAudit.org](#) offers an easy way to search tax documents in the U.S., as does the [UK Charity Commission](#) in the United Kingdom.

3 / The Menu: What Issues Will Aid Providers Promote?

Providing aid to support peacebuilding or democratisation in a transitional country is a concept so broad that it can be hard to imagine how assistance providers translate such ideas into specific actions. What do aid providers in transitional countries actually provide or make available to their local interlocutors? What exactly is on offer?

Below we examine Western aid's standard democracy and peacebuilding "menus" (which apply across governmental, intergovernmental and private organisations). Whether these primarily reflect what assistance providers like, rather than what recipients need, is a separate question we do not explore here.

The Democracy Menu

Democracy is an extremely broad concept, but aid providers have gravitated toward a relatively specific range of democracy program offerings over the past two decades. These fall into three basic categories: aiding elections and political parties, strengthening governmental institutions, and supporting civil society. The programs generally assume the existence of a coherent state, seeking to moderate government power and check against executive excess. They also tend to intersect with policies aimed at supporting human rights, women's participation and other elements of citizen empowerment.

Aiding elections and political parties: Democracy support in most transitional countries emphasises supporting free and fair elections and political party development. These are seen as essential building blocks of democratic political contestation and a pivotal gap to fill in countries emerging from extended periods of authoritarian rule.

One main type of elections aid is technical support to electoral commissions or electoral management bodies, and covers anything from what kind of ballot paper works best, to how to recruit and train the staff of polling places. At least for the first elections following the end of an authoritarian regime, the aid community also tends to offer significant financial assistance to cover the costs of organising elections. Assembled jointly by a number of major donors contributing to a common "basket" of funding, this assistance is usually managed by one organisation—often the UNDP and the UN's Department of Political Affairs, unless there is a better placed regional organisation.

The other main category of election-related programming is election monitoring. This involves either sending international observers or supporting domestic monitors. International election monitoring has become a large area of activity, with many different organisations—national, regional and global—sending missions to observe elections. Most transitional countries now accept international observers at their elections, especially those seeking to gain international credibility for achieving a basic level of democracy. However, the field has become more politicised in recent years, with a number of governments, including some authoritarian ones like Russia, sponsoring observer missions for the sake of supporting governments favourable to them, rather than to provide objective assessments of elections.

Although it sounds like a potentially sensitive area of international engagement, political party assistance is another common form of aid in transitional countries. Its basic goal is to help create a political landscape in which multiple parties can connect to large numbers of citizens and represent their interests.

Most of the assistance takes the form of training and advice to political party officials and activists on different aspects of party development—how to organise grassroots outreach, build an effective party platform, incorporate women and youth into a party, do fundraising campaigns, mount effective media outreach, and so on. Rarely does such assistance involve direct funding for parties.

Political party assistance is mostly carried out by American and European political foundations, which are related to Western political parties (e.g., German political foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung). Sometimes, party aid follows a sister party model in which a political foundation of one ideological orientation seeks to assist parties of the same orientation in the countries where it is operating. Other times, it follows a multiparty approach in which the Western organisation offers assistance to all of the registered parties (or all the parties represented in parliament in a country) to avoid the perception of favouring one over another. In Sweden, for instance, 70 percent of the budget for this kind of work is allocated to the sister model, while the rest follows a multiparty approach.

Strengthening governmental institutions: A second core area of Western democracy assistance aims to strengthen the democratic character and effectiveness of major political institutions, including the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Informal institutions (e.g., religious or tribal bodies) and processes (e.g., traditional dialogue or justice mechanisms) tend to get less attention.

Many of these programs focus on strengthening national parliaments to operate more efficiently and responsively to citizens, offering training for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on legislative process, parliamentary ethics, gender issues and budget procedures. The programs may also focus on constituency outreach, helping parliamentarians learn to connect directly with the citizens they represent, or alternatively, on rebuilding executive branch functions within key ministries such as finance, justice, interior, health and education ministries. During transitions, Western assistance providers may even embed advisers, provide salary support, and initiate recruitment and training programs within these ministries. Often, however, these forms of assistance can succeed only if parliamentarians from all major represented parties take part in the program and do not view it as an effort to strengthen the ruling party's role.

Another large area of transition assistance relating to governmental institutions is rule of law aid. Most such aid has more to do with improving governance than democracy per se, but part of it specifically pertains to reinforcing judicial independence and offering human rights training to those working in criminal justice systems (e.g., prosecutors, police, prison officers). Rule of law aid can also extend to non-governmental parts of the legal system such as law schools, legal aid providers and bar associations.

Although the problems that most legal systems embody—such as inefficiency and corruption—tend to have deep roots and are not easily changed by training programs and the like, citizens in transitional countries often welcome rule of law aid because they are angry about the current system. Moreover, compared with other types of democracy-related assistance, rule of law aid sounds more technical than political and therefore tends to trigger fewer political sensitivities. Yet, such work is just as political as any other area. Reinforcing judicial independence, for example, is about limiting the power of politicians to interfere with the courts—a good practice, but hardly apolitical.

In transitional contexts, Western aid providers also support reform programs aimed at strengthening local (i.e., subnational) government institutions. This may involve work with national governments to help them design and pass laws that distribute power downward to local government, or work with mayors and local councils to strengthen their capacities to govern and represent the interests of citizens. Two premises form the basis for this area of work: first, that democracy will become meaningful to ordinary citizens if they are able to experience it in their daily life rather than only through occasional participation in national elections; and second, that it may be easier to influence positive change in local institutions than in more complex national ones. These assumptions have been challenged in many

countries where efforts to decentralise power have been blocked by national politicians unwilling to give up significant power, and by growing evidence that local institutions often share many of the same problems as national ones, including corruption and unfair treatment.

Supporting civil society development: The term “civil society” has become commonplace in the world of international assistance, but can be confusing for those in countries newly in transition who have not encountered it before and do not find an equivalent in their own language.

In talking about civil society, Western aid providers are referring to the world of nongovernmental organisations that operate separately from both the government and the business sector. The basic logic for supporting them is that, whereas aid for government institutions improves the “supply” of democracy and human rights, aid for the nongovernmental sector helps bolster the “demand” for it.

In any society, the nongovernmental sector includes many types of institutions, ranging from religious organisations and trade unions to professional associations and private media. In its democracy building and peacebuilding work, the Western aid community tends to concentrate on a relatively narrow part of the overall nongovernmental domain: NGOs that carry out either advocacy or service delivery work alongside (or in place of) government institutions. NGOs carry out activities that aid providers think is crucial to democratisation and rule of law—such as serving a “watchdog” function with regard to the government, and advocating human rights and political pluralism. Assistance providers also tend to find them easier partners to work with compared to more traditional social organisations, such as religious institutions, which typically have fewer English speakers on staff and less tendency to seek out Western democracy and peacebuilding support.

During the 1990s, when democracy assistance was in its initial heyday, most aid-receiving governments did not resist outside funders offering grants and training to NGOs (including diaspora-led ones) in their countries. They often did not take the NGOs of their own societies very seriously, seeing them as marginal actors, in comparison with mass movements, trade unions, and the like. However, in recent years, that has changed dramatically. Many governments have come to see that these mainly liberal, urban NGOs can push effectively for major policy changes, including by mobilising large numbers of citizens to oppose or pressure leaders. This fact, together with greater assertiveness by many non-Western powers in challenging basic rules of the international system in general, has led to a wave of efforts by governments around the world to restrict space for civil society to operate and for external actors to provide them aid. More than 50 countries have taken steps in this direction—not just non-democratic countries like Russia, Ethiopia, and Vietnam, but also a number of democratic ones, like India, Nicaragua, and Peru.

Western aid providers are pushing back against this wave of restrictions on civil society funding, arguing that they are not engaged in political meddling but in supporting basic human values and civic practices, and that NGOs have a right to seek assistance externally as well as internally under international norms of freedom of association. They are supporting coalitions of local NGOs that resist governmental measures to restrict space for civil society, such as in Kenya and Cambodia. However, they are also questioning their own methods, wondering if they have erred on the side of too much support for elite-based NGOs and should now be looking to assist other kinds of nongovernmental groups that have more of a popular base and less formal structure. The struggle between aid providers and many governments over what forms of civil society assistance are appropriate touches very basic questions (and highlights competing understandings) about political values and rights, and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

The Peacebuilding Menu

In post-conflict contexts, many parts of the standard democracy menu (e.g., elections and political party development) are pursued alongside various types of peacebuilding assistance. In addition, Western support may extend to programs in areas such as land reform, education reform, and promotion of shared

use of resources in order to surmount presumed root causes of the conflict. Likewise, mediation and dialogue programs that encourage peaceful coexistence, and resettlement programs for returning refugees and internally displaced persons, can figure in the amalgam of peacebuilding support that aid providers offer. However, in this section we pay special attention to three of the most common areas of peacebuilding assistance: security sector reform (SSR); disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programs for ex-combatants; and transitional justice in support of victims and national reconciliation.

Like the standard democracy menu, the peacebuilding menu includes support for both governmental and nongovernmental organisations. However, it tends to place comparatively more emphasis on dialogue over results; cohesion over accountability; security over economics; and institution building and inclusive political settlements over elections. Moreover, unlike democracy support, which typically presumes the existence of a coherent state whose power needs to be held in check, peacebuilding tends to presume the opposite, and has more overlap with the domain of statebuilding (see, e.g., [International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding](#)).

Disarmament: DDR programs, often led by the United Nations, aim to disband and remove weapons from armed groups, and thereby restore the monopoly on the use of force to the state. The programs are massive and expensive, and since the 1990s have been considered stock peacebuilding interventions. So standard have they become that the leading guidance on the topic (the Integrated DDR Standards) runs over 1,000 pages.

Yet, DDR programs have mixed records of performance. Integrating former combatants into the army or police can potentially weaken already struggling institutions, solving one problem (demobilisation) only to produce another (institutional weakening). Even when the “D” stages (disarmament and demobilisation) are relatively successful, the “R” stage (reintegration) will often remain elusive, being a mid- to long-term objective that depends on many other political and economic factors. Yet, there is no substitute to pursuing DDR. Ultimately, it is in the public interest for political insurgencies to abate, and for former combatants to desist from a return to arms or from being recycled into organised crime or new militia. Western aid providers will continue to support this work for years to come.

SSR: A country emerging out of armed conflict requires new security concepts and practices for peacetime. Even in contexts in which the main perpetrators of violence were non-state actors, the forces of the state often violate basic rules to combat the insurgency, using repressive practices that undermine the rule of law. As such, the norms, codes of conduct, insignia and personnel of state security agencies—especially the army and police—usually warrant changes. Known as security sector reform (SSR), this area of Western assistance has become a standard part of the menu in post-conflict, but also democratic, transitions.

The particular method of reform can vary considerably, depending on the condition of national institutions. Sometimes the “barrel” is rotten and thus a whole department (e.g., a presidential guard or anti-subversives unit within state intelligence services) is dismantled all at once. Other times, the barrel is fine but the apples are rotten, requiring a vetting of the institution’s personnel, or at a minimum of its senior ranks. Creating new oversight bodies, such as police ombudsmen or anti-corruption agencies, can be part of the SSR agenda as well.

SSR issues attract the attention and funds of Western aid providers, but not always their patience. Despite the inevitable slowness in changing the culture and mind-set of security agencies long used to operating according to their own rules, aid providers seldom commit to these programs over the long term.

Transitional justice: In less than twenty years, Western aid providers have gone from asking whether a transitional country should confront the violent episodes of its past to asking only how. Transitional justice—a set of ideas and tools for balancing accountability and reconciliation—has emerged as a standard expectation, without exception, of successful transition. Combining trials, truth commissions, victim

reparations and institutional reforms, transitional justice is presumed both necessary and beneficial for post-conflict and post-authoritarian settings alike.

Transitional justice has acquired a prominent status in the minds of most Western aid providers. It centres on victims (and thus has inherent moral appeal) and is partially grounded in major treaties (leading some states to consider it obligatory and enforceable in character). In addition, the judicial component of transitional justice has an important institutional dimension. It encompasses not only national courts, but also a permanent International Criminal Court, multiple international and hybrid tribunals (all financially supported mainly by the West), and a supportive and intertwined nongovernmental lobby. When the interests of justice and those of peace or democratic restoration come into tension, the former will not always easily cede to the latter (e.g., Uganda, Libya, and Syria). Amnesties, which for centuries facilitated political and peace settlements—and were crucial to the progress of transitions in places like 1990s South Africa—have largely fallen out of favour. Accountability-driven transitional justice has climbed the ranks, despite often-meagre results.

A Word about the Parallel Domain of Statebuilding

Statebuilding seeks to develop an effective set of institutions that can provide citizens with basic public goods such as security, education, health, and economic progress. The term generally refers to the creation of administrative and security functions rather than institutions that develop national identity, however the terms statebuilding and nationbuilding are often used interchangeably.

Statebuilding is a much-debated concept given that has always been based on Western notions of the state and government. There had been a widespread expectation after World War II that decolonisation would gradually lead to states adopting a Western model of institutions and government, but this rarely happened. In most post-colonial states, the institutions of the state existed in name only and power flowed through other networks (e.g., of family or ethnicity) or through the military.

When statebuilding re-emerged in the 1990s, the criticisms were that it was a neo-colonial exercise based on ideas of the state that had not succeeded in many countries. Coming alongside the neo-liberal Washington Consensus, it seemed to reflect a view of governance and state function that ignored realities on the ground. What development analysts saw as weak states were often the result of strong informal networks deliberately keeping the state that way to ensure their own survival. Elites often seemed to be sabotaging attempts to impose Western norms on their systems.

Security concerns, in particular, have dominated statebuilding. For example, tens of billions of dollars have been spent in Afghanistan and Iraq building up the security forces while only a tiny fraction of that has been spent on other areas of the state such as the judiciary (or related issues such as management and oversight). Police have been configured as paramilitary forces taking on insurgencies rather than civilians protecting people from criminal threats. The lines between humanitarian assistance, aid and security have all been blurred, dramatically changing the way people in each sector now do their work.

4 / The Assumptions: What Premises Will Drive Aid Providers?

While interests and motivations vary considerably among the many different aid actors involved in transitional countries, a common underlying set of assumptions about transitions has guided the Western aid community since the early 1990s. It is an optimistic set of views stemming from the unusually positive international environment for democracy and peacebuilding in the immediate post-Cold War period, including in Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Africa.

Some of these views have been reconsidered over time, as conflict settlements came undone or failed to deliver expected peace dividends, and numerous democratic transitions went off track. For example, today few aid providers view transitions as consisting of only a single pivotal moment. Instead, their new assumption is that there will be multiple important phases.

Yet, there are other assumptions that, despite growing doubts, have yet to be fully reconsidered. These beliefs are not specific to any particular country; instead, Western aid providers tend to rely on them as a starting point in all new transitional countries. They are tied to Western ideas of historical progress: the model through which the West generally seeks to make sense of its own history and global progress. Aid recipients must be aware of these in order to make sense of the “why” behind aid providers’ often-confusing actions and statements across the governmental, intergovernmental and private categories.

All Good Things Go Together

Writing about U.S. approaches to the developing world in the 1960s, Robert Packenham identified as a central article of faith the assumption that “all good things go together”—the idea that no tensions exist between political change, social change, economic change and other elements of the broader development agenda.

It is surprising that this assumption emerged when the United States and Europe began giving extensive assistance to countries coming out of colonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, given that all good things did not go together in the West’s own historical development toward democracy and peace (e.g., for much of U.S. history, democracy coexisted with slavery and rapid economic growth occurred alongside racial exclusion, and for the better part of two centuries in Western Europe, social welfare expansion coexisted with violent nationalism). Nevertheless, the belief that all elements of positive change reinforce each other resurfaced in the 1990s, as the West offered support to dozens of countries coming out of civil war or authoritarian rule. Western aid efforts pushed for change on all fronts at once, assuming that they would be mutually reinforcing. As such, the aid community—often responding to the demands of locals who wanted to move quickly and dramatically across multiple areas—pressed transitional governments to move on an extensive, and sometimes overwhelming, list of simultaneous priorities: write a new constitution, hold transitional elections, create new political parties, reform legal institutions, restructure the parliament, modernise the economy, reform the military, create independent media, and much else.

Not much warning or concern was given to potential tensions within this maximalist agenda—such as the fact that pressing forward on market reforms would involve serious austerity that could undercut the popularity of newly elected governments, or that greater pressure for legal accountability or competitive elections could undermine parallel objectives such as national unity or political inclusion in a post-conflict environment.

Revisiting the assumption

The experiences of many attempted transitions, most recently in the Middle East, have made clear that all good things do not always go together. Aid providers are beginning to show greater appreciation of the need to prioritise among various goals, given the inevitability of trade-offs in transitional countries that must balance a huge range of competing challenges with a limited amount of political capital to expend. For instance, the UNDP [recently recognised](#) the need to move away from a wish list of development assistance programs and instead think in terms of short, medium and longer term reforms. Yet, it remains common among government aid providers to disagree on what the priorities are—economic, political, social, security, or other—and to press their own specific areas of concern. When this happens, efforts collide, resulting in good things working at cross-purposes rather than in better harmony.

Transitions Are Natural

The remarkable spread of democratic openings and peace processes in the late 1980s and 1990s, often in places where few expected democratic or peaceful change to emerge, led to the assumption that transitions are natural processes, reflecting intrinsic gravitation toward what communities really want. The key, according to this logic, is to “remove obstacles” to positive change, and peace and democracy will follow their own natural momentum. In relation to democracy, this assumption has been particularly strong among actors based in the United States, which unlike Europe has never experienced a different kind of rule and therefore persists in seeing it as natural condition.

Revisiting the assumption

The failure of many attempted democratic transitions, such as in former Soviet republics, and the resurgence of violence in countries that seemed to have achieved peace, such as South Sudan and Yemen, have forced the Western aid community to rethink this assumption. It now gives more attention to analysing entrenched obstacles to the emergence of democratic and peaceful norms over time, the realistic limits of the influence outsiders can have, and the patronage networks and structural disincentives for those in power to reform. Nevertheless, in light of the generic and quixotic form that most Western financial and technical assistance took in response to the first two years of the Arab awakening (e.g., in places such as Tunisia and Egypt), it is reasonable to ask to what degree the assumption is truly under reconsideration.

Transitions Can Be Systematised

A strikingly common model of change occurred in many countries in the 1990s. Civil wars ended as the result of exhaustion, negotiation, and agreement, supported by the helpful good offices of the United Nations or other international actors. In parallel, democratisation was restored after authoritarian regimes lost legitimacy and power, transitional elections took place, new constitutions were drafted, and other democratic reforms were enacted. The result of these patterns was a widespread assumption that transitions in very different places were basically alike in some fundamental ways, and therefore similar sequencing of assistance efforts could work in very different national environments.

Revisiting the assumption

The Western aid community has responded to the growing reality of different transition paths and outcomes by repeatedly insisting that programs must be tailored to specific national environments, and not built on general assumptions and models. A constructive response by some aid organisations (e.g., DFID) is to build analytic frameworks that have a reasonable number of different potential transitional paths. Such efforts create a plausible middle ground between assuming that all transitions are basically alike or, equally incorrectly, that each transition is so unique that there are no useful lessons that can be learned from other experiences.

However, as with the assumption about transitions being natural, it is proving hard for Western aid providers to move away from the belief in universal patterns of peacebuilding or democratisation. While there is recognition at a higher level that transitions do vary, those involved on the ground in key activities such as democracy promotion, security system reform and disarmament, often continue to roll out boilerplate plans. The well-worn templates of transition assistance and the bureaucratic incentives to do what is easiest (rather than what is most effective) still get in the way.

Starting Conditions Matter Little

The fact that democratic and post-conflict transitions emerged in so many countries with such different political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics, gave rise to the assumption that starting conditions do not matter a great deal. The prototype of transition was assumed to matter more than the local starting conditions.

Revisiting the assumption

Faced with the high variability of transition outcomes around the world, experts in democratisation and peacebuilding have started to emphasise that certain structural characteristics of a transitional country either favour, or alternatively complicate, the realisation of democracy and peace. These include a history of political pluralism, a lack of deep sectarian divides in society, a decent-sized middle class, a serviceable state apparatus, and strong ties with other peaceful democratic states. These characteristics are not pre-conditions of successful transition—some countries, like India, have managed to establish largely democratic systems without some of them—but they appear to raise the odds of democratic and peacebuilding success.

The Western aid community—especially governmental and intergovernmental bodies—is not yet sure what to do with this fact. For now, there remains a strong emphasis on the idea that any country can become democratic and peaceful if it makes the right choices (irrespective of starting conditions). In parallel, there remains a strong desire not to close the door to any society or government that says it wants to democratise or end a conflict. Nevertheless, some aid providers are starting to consider how to improve understanding of (and adaptation to) the diversity of transitional countries' starting conditions in order to ensure that programs and strategies better fit national contexts. This is especially the case with fragile and conflict-affected states with lower social cohesion and weaker public institutions. In such states, aid providers increasingly appreciate that the challenge is of a different order, as the forces let loose by a transition can more easily push these societies apart rather than bring them together.

The Next Generation Will Hasten Peace and Democracy

A common and attractive assumption in the Western aid community is that in transitional countries, the next generation, usually defined as people under 30 or 35, will be crucial to the successful consolidation of peace and democracy. The idea is that young people are more liberal, comparatively untainted by the prior national experiences of conflict or authoritarianism, and more innately disposed toward positive social change.

Revisiting the assumption

With the benefit of nearly three decades of hindsight since the waves of democratic and post-conflict transitions of the late 1980s and 1990s, this assumption is showing its age—literally and figuratively. The emergence into power of a younger generation has not produced transformative results in many countries (with North Korea as the most recent leading example). The reason is not surprising: the young are part of the same social context as their elders, and as such, have been taught or had to learn to operate within similar conditions and rules of the game. In some cases, like Russia and Hungary, significant parts of the (once) new generation of leaders have turned out to be anti-liberal: they are more nationalistic,

anti-Western, and sceptical about democracy and peacebuilding than a large number of their ousted elders. For many of them, coming of age during transitions meant experiencing the instability and insecurity that such periods often beget. In some, this created a penchant for strong-hand rule (rather than deeper democracy and rule of law) and the political resurrection of a mythically superior past. Notwithstanding this, the aid community's assumption of the next generation's political and moral superiority has yet to be overcome.

The Public Will Be Patient

Linked to the assumption about the promise of the next generation is a parallel belief that the population in a transitional country will be patient and willing to sacrifice immediate gains for future ones. This assumption is often the result of an inadequate appreciation of just how disruptive a transition can be, especially in terms of political fragmentation and economic anxiety. As such, the Western aid community often is caught off guard by strong and quick shifts to populism or sectarianism.

Revisiting the assumption

Western aid providers entering new transitional contexts have become more sensitive to the dangers of failing to anticipate and manage the high public expectations a transition creates. As such, they increasingly encourage national decision-makers to moderate public expectations and look for “quick wins” that will provide some benefits to broad parts of the population early in a transition—recognising that the escalator of expectations is rapid and the pace of structural reform slow.

At the same time, some potentially obvious quick wins still tend to be overlooked. For example, very little transition assistance focuses on easing everyday frustrations and sites of interaction between governments and citizens (e.g., registering births, deaths, and marriages, getting a passport, even flicking on a light switch or turning on a faucet). Worse still, in some areas, Western aid providers directly contribute to artificially raised expectations. For example, in the area of transitional justice, aid providers have often pressured weak states (e.g. Burundi, Nepal, and South Sudan) to make early and unrealistic commitments to compensate victims, try criminals, re-establish the rule of law, and heal national divides. When results are inevitably slow and partial (or in some cases, non-existent), there is a knock-on effect: public patience with the rest of the transition's offerings drops as well.

Civil Society Will Be a Positive Actor

When countries are mired in conflict or authoritarian rule, Western aid providers (especially private funders) have a history of prioritising support to civil society in the belief that it can eventually catalyse a transition to peace or democracy. They have done this in the bleakest times in places ranging from the former Soviet Union to Chile to South Africa, and continue today in places such as Belarus, Syria, and Zimbabwe. Yet, this basic conviction about the virtue of civil society does not end when the transition arises, but instead grows. Western aid providers believe that a strong civil society is a sine qua non of successful transition.

Revisiting the assumption

The transition assistance community has started to evolve away from its early simplistic assumptions about civil society. Aid providers increasingly recognise that in countries that managed to sustain reasonably open socio-political space prior to a transition, civil society not only will comprise a wide variety of social institutions (from community groups to religious, ethnic and business associations) but also will reflect a diversity of ideological currents. This will usually include both liberal, pluralistic groups (represented primarily by the NGOs that Western aid tends to favour) as well as illiberal, nationalist currents that may well not contribute to peace or democratisation. For example, in Indonesia there are not only liberal but also very conservative Islamist groups that have used the space for civil society to pursue

illiberal and anti-democratic ends. In Sri Lanka, there are civil society groups that promote racism apt to trigger political violence. In Burma, few human rights groups have spoken out against the persecution of the Rohingya minority. And in Hungary, some grassroots movements exhibit neo-Nazi ideology.

As a result, Western aid providers now seek more information from civil society groups about their commitment to inclusive democratic values and about the depth of their links to the communities they purport to serve. They also pay somewhat more attention to potential like-minded partners that exist beyond the the country's NGO elite. Yet, the tendency to assume civil society as a whole will be a positive force in and for democratisation and peacebuilding remains predominant among aid providers in transitional countries.

Individuals Make the Most Difference

Often a focus of Western transition assistance is on the figures who were previously on the frontlines of political change. The idea is that these individuals triumphed despite the system, not because of it. Yet, from Iraq's Ahmad Chalabi to Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai and Timor-Leste's Xanana Gusmao, the favoured leader has often proved a great disappointment once in government. In some cases, this is because leaders of revolutions or guerrilla groups lack the skills, knowledge, or temperament to deal with the prosaic routines of governance. In others, it is due to behaviour that aid providers dislike but that is rewarded with national electoral success. Hamid Karzai was corrupt, a disastrous administrator, and a source of immense frustration for international interlocutors, but he was often very skilled at navigating Afghan politics. Even a close relationship with the local leader may prove worthless. The U.S. government believed that its executive relations with Karzai and Iraq's former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, enabled the United States to achieve its policy aims, yet both leaders left their countries with worsening corruption, insurgencies, and near collapse.

Revisiting the assumption

The repeated experience of promising leaders failing to usher in sustainable peace and liberal democracy has led assistance providers to reconsider the emphasis on the heroic or charismatic figure. Certainly, it makes a difference if a country is led by a Mandela rather than a Milosevic. Yet, the importance of individual leadership often counts less than other factors, like institutional legacies and capacities—a fact that is increasingly recognised, but not sufficiently. For example, in Myanmar, almost all the outside political focus has been on Aung San Suu Kyi, but there is little analysis of her policy preferences or the internal workings and capacities of her National League for Democracy. Suu Kyi is now a leading figure in the Myanmar government, holding a key position that de facto puts her “above the president” despite the constitutional provision that such status is not possible.

Elections Will Establish Accountability

The aid community has tended to assume that the holding of regular and genuine elections in countries coming out of authoritarian rule will ensure a basic level of political accountability. Elections, the thinking goes, will allow citizens to unseat rulers and vote in ever better future polls, ensuring that more effective leaders emerge over time.

Revisiting the assumption

Some transitional countries have successfully established regular elections but struggled to institute real political accountability, undermining the desired process of citizens improving their leaders by being able to reject poor ones. Political elites are often able to manipulate electoral processes or use corruption to capture the entire available political spectrum, ensuring that alternation of power does not really bring entrenched power structures under the thumb of public accountability.

Although still attached to the basic importance of elections in democracy, the Western aid community has begun to develop a broader approach to accountability: one that sees elections as only one part of the process, and that defines accountability in both vertical (state-society) and horizontal (society-society) terms. This is reflected in programming for peacebuilding and democratisation aid, which increasingly encompass issues such as anti-corruption and parliamentary oversight. There is also a greater recognition among donors that electoral design matters, as Afghanistan and other transitional countries have shown that accountability depends greatly on the voting system adopted. Yet, an overriding importance continues to be attached, as such, to elections, as compared to the longer-term guarantors of true political accountability.

New Technologies Will Be Good for Transitions

Many Western aid providers hailed the advent of new information and communications technologies, in particular social media, as facilitators of democracy and peace. These technologies, the thinking went, would lower the barriers to entry for citizens who want to add their voices to public policy debates. Furthermore, many assumed, the ease of communications would lead to greater interaction among diverse socio-economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, thus bridging societal divisions.

These optimistic assumptions peaked during the early months of the Arab Spring. Social media stars like Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google executive, emerged overnight as protagonists of the revolutions. It quickly became cliché to refer to the anti-regime uprisings that unfolded across parts of the Middle East as the “Facebook/Twitter Revolutions”. Young Internet entrepreneurs began to develop innovative web-based programs intended to hold authorities accountable (e.g., [Morsi Meter](#)). Human rights activists and citizen journalists began publishing photographs and videos of atrocities on their mobile phones—evidence that in many cases became indispensable, especially in countries like Syria, where international media access has been severely restricted. And donors funded scores of projects premised on the idea that new technologies would support transitions to peace and democracy, placing emphasis on empowering civil society through social media.

Revisiting the assumption

By now, it is evident that the Arab Spring failed to produce political leaders who looked and sounded like the initial young, liberal, social-media savvy protagonists. Almost across the board, societal divisions have become more entrenched. Online documentation of human rights abuses has rarely resulted in justice for victims. Instead, in most Arab Spring countries, pro-democracy protests have been followed by outbreaks of violence and the revival of old authoritarian structures. In many places, including non-Arab Spring countries like Turkey and China, authorities have also tried to stifle opposition voices online by simply blocking or controlling major social media websites.

In light of these experiences, the evolving understanding is that while new technologies can have some positive effects on social protest and regime change, they can risk polarising an already-fragmented society in times of transition. For instance, [recent research](#) indicates that social media can reinforce users’ prejudices by creating “echo chambers” in which like-minded people connect to share news and opinions among themselves. The result is that pre-existing biases are unchallenged, bouncing back and forth among homogenous clusters of users. In fragile states, this could mean reinforcing noxious group dynamics, and thus exacerbating rather than alleviating social divisions. Western aid providers are also more aware of other potential risks, including: the use of data mining technology by governments to spy on citizens, curb civil liberties and potentially help regimes identify political dissent; the use of multimedia and online distribution platforms by extremist groups, such as the Islamic State, to spread terror and propaganda; and the rising automation of low-skill jobs, which is likely to have a mainly negative economic impact on transitional countries with large low-skill workforces. In brief, Western aid providers are still learning how to measure and mitigate the risks of new technologies while leveraging their potential benefits.

Familiar Assumptions and Practices in the Tunisian Transition

The Tunisian transition ... arose at a relatively advanced moment in global thinking about transitions when there was reason to expect more from the outside world. The transition's inherent conditions gave reason for further optimism. Unlike South American countries, Tunisia was not emerging from a military dictatorship in which civilians had to wrest democracy from an all-powerful army. In contrast to Central and Eastern European states, it did not require transition from a communist to a market economy, nor overturning a totalitarian system that controlled almost every aspect of public and private life. Unlike South Africa's transition, Tunisia's was not negotiated at the barrel of a gun, nor infused with deep racial and ethnic cleavages capable of sparking civil war. Unlike Iraq and Afghanistan, its transition was the fruit of internal revolt rather than outside intervention. Just as importantly, the country's interim government adopted a structured roadmap for transition, transparently communicating election plans for a Constituent Assembly, elected in October 2011, that would draft the constitution and presage a more permanent form of rule-based, democratic governance.

Other structural characteristics were less favourable. The surrounding region offered no obvious Arab democratic model and few Arabic-speaking transition experts on whom to call for advice. Tunisia had no significant experience with political pluralism. It also faced (other) challenges common to societies emerging from authoritarian rule...

The country nevertheless provided a generally constructive atmosphere for the transmission of international expertise. A compact, middle-income country with a small population, settled borders and no history of mass internecine violence, Tunisia presented internationals with refreshingly few obstacles. Embassies, multilateral agencies, international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and consulting firms recognised this and began organising conferences and developing projects there early in 2011.

Tunisia adopted an open-door approach to foreign expertise, making it widely perceived as the "most welcoming" Arab Spring country for international activities. Government officials and local civil society groups alike were eager for foreign advice and lessons from other transitions. An accommodating regulatory structure made it reasonably easy for foreign NGOs to set up. This contrasted with Egypt and Libya, where establishing offices and outreach programs proved far more challenging. Tunisia quickly became a convenient base of regional operations for many international organisations. What began as a trickle of expert help to the transition became a flood.

Despite having a larger class of skilled professionals than many of its regional neighbours, absorption capacity was limited. Unlike countries in Central America, South East Asia and Central Africa, Tunisia lacked experience with a large and varied international presence when its transition began. It was accustomed to tourism but not the frenzy of so many foreigners and international agencies simultaneously setting up shop, arranging long-term rentals, hiring staff, offering funds, organising events and generally being omnipresent. Though at first the landscape was exhilarating, that feeling began to wane. With high expectations for reform, comparatively limited transitional achievements and increasing political and economic polarisation, many Tunisians soon wondered how much the sudden influx was benefiting them. Doubts were not only voiced on the national side. Dimmed expectations also produced scepticism among internationals about the country's political will and capacity for change ...

With such structural dynamics at play, relations become complicated and confusion is understandable. Those on the receiving end of expert assistance tend to feel overwhelmed by the innumerable, well-intentioned actors who request meetings, compile diagnostic reports, host seminars, conduct training workshops and offer advice. Tunisia offered no exception – though interviewees expressed gratitude for some of the technical assistance they individually received and confidence that many intentions were bona fide. Frustration and confusion were, nevertheless, the dominant sentiments voiced – a reflection of direct experiences but also of a perceived "chaotic" general atmosphere and "non-stop" docket of conferences, training and meetings. "We've been inundated", said one Tunisian. "There are so many organisations coming and going – it's impossible to keep track of it all".

Excerpted from [Inside the Transition Bubble: International Expert Assistance in Tunisia](#) (IFIT, 2013)

5 / The Methods: How Will Aid Providers Operate and What Difficulties Will Arise?

We have discussed some of the main thematic preferences of aid providers in transitional contexts. However, what of their methods? What are the different ways that Western aid organisations deliver assistance?

This is an important question because the methods they use directly determine how useful the assistance really is. Methods also constitute a major source of misunderstanding in transitional countries, as perennial problems in the delivery of aid have led to perennial unfulfilled resolutions by Western assistance providers to do better in future. In this chapter, we look at these, as well as the delivery methods themselves.

Standard Delivery Mechanisms

Financial Assistance

Western donors—especially governments, development banks and private foundations—provide a huge variety of forms of financial assistance to their counterparts in transitional countries. These include:

- **Grants.** A grant is a financial gift bestowed by one entity or individual to another in order to support a specific organisation or project. In that sense, grants are not, strictly speaking, contracts for service (i.e., when a donor has a project of its own and hires an individual or entity to implement it). Grants can take many forms, including sub-grants (from one grantmaking institution to another via an intermediary), seed grants (used to launch a new organisation or project), matching grants (made to match another donor's funds) and challenge grants (paid only if the receiving organisation manages to raise additional funds from other donors). ([Foundation Center](#))
- **Project loans.** Some large aid providers, like the World Bank and other multilateral development banks, provide loans to transitional governments for development projects. These are usually in the areas of socioeconomic growth, but occasionally relate to conventional democratisation or peacebuilding projects (e.g., to support ex-combatant reintegration).
- **Budget support.** This consists of direct payments by Western donors to government ministries to cover their normal operating costs. These can take the form of restricted or unrestricted budget support, and can be general (i.e., paid directly to the central government budget) or sectoral (i.e., given directly to a specific sector or ministry). Budget support became common in the early 2000s as part of a broader effort to reduce the demands that aid providers were putting on the administrative capacity of recipient countries, and to increase local ownership of development programming.
- **Balance of payments support.** These are loans that the IMF and other international lenders provide to transitional countries that can no longer pay for essential imports or debt payments. It is largely emergency support for governments facing immediate fiscal crises, as many transitional countries do in the aftermath of war or dictatorship. This kind of support can also take the form of deficit financing for countries perceived as a credit risk.
- **Debt cancellation.** The IMF and World Bank's Debt Relief Under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative approves debt reduction packages in heavily indebted countries, mostly in Africa. The Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) allows eligible countries to receive full relief of some debts by the IMF, World Bank and African Development Fund. The Inter-American Development Bank offers a similar program to HIPC countries in the Americas.

- **Loan guarantees.** Wealthy countries and intergovernmental organisations will sometimes offer transitional countries loan guarantees in order to enable them to borrow money. For instance, the U.S. government recently backed Ukraine with 2 billion USD in loan guarantees to prevent the country's economic collapse.

Technical Assistance

Whereas financial assistance involves transferring funds, technical assistance involves transferring knowledge. Though it usually takes the form of training or advice, it may also entail research, documentation, or direct implementation.

Examples of technical assistance in the democracy domain could include expert advice for parliamentarians on legislative practices, training judges in the use of new court management systems, and preparing civic activists or political party representatives in methods of grassroots organising. In the peacebuilding domain, technical assistance might include advising on DDR programs or sharing comparative experiences of post-conflict constitutional reform.

Technical assistance is mainly supplied in transitional countries by a mix of intergovernmental and private organisations. This can include non-profit organisations specialised in some area of post-conflict work (e.g., security sector reform), large for-profit consulting firms that do technical assistance in a wide range of areas, or various organs of the United Nations or a regional intergovernmental organisation.

Technical assistance in any form has a higher chance of being effective if it is demand-driven, and if the implementing entity has the required technical expertise, takes seriously the need to tailor assistance to the transitional country, and carries out well-designed training that creates genuine learning processes. Unfortunately, much technical assistance falls short. One of the most common problems is the use of cookie-cutter approaches: offering the same assistance in very different contexts rather than customising the work to the transitional country in question. This lapse can take a wide range of insidious forms: a comprehensive presentation on media reform that makes no mention of the particular country's media laws and institutions, the use of civil law doctrines to reform a common law jurisdiction, repeated reference to foreign experiences that have no relevance to the context in question, and so on.

Another common problem is the format of the technical assistance. Training programs are frequently too short or insubstantial to ensure real learning. Often conceived in Western capitals, workshops typically are held as one-time events (rather than structured series), in hotels (rather than recipients' workplaces), in recipients' languages (rather than local ones), and with little to no follow-up process to assess quality or impact. "Training of trainers" programs, which ought to be the rule, often remain the exception. Furthermore, technical assistance programs often over-emphasise short-term training of individuals at the expense of other useful activities, such as long-term coaching and mentorship programs and the pursuit of more wholesale institutional change (e.g., enhancing the skills of all middle management staff of a particular sector).

At its best, however, technical assistance can consist of an organisation or practitioner with deep experience from a range of contexts offering practical and customised advice on locally-set priorities over a mutually defined timeframe. In this respect, one of the most important things aid recipients can do for themselves is to develop the skill to distinguish between high and low quality providers of technical assistance. The difference is often palpable, and the opportunity cost too great to lose precious time on under-qualified Western experts with limited knowledge, comparative experience or genuine commitment.

Project Support

Project support—another common form of technical assistance in transitional contexts—involves the use of intermediaries to deliver large-scale projects capable of generating change in a particular sector or institution. Such support can take the form of a project to introduce new case management software

in a judicial system (as the World Bank has done in Colombia), reform a country's electoral management body (as UNDP has done in Pakistan), or restructure a national police force (as the EU has done in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Project support often contains some elements of technical assistance, but usually goes beyond that and involves funds and structured training for local institutions.

For these projects, aid organisations tend to hire Western intermediary organisations, which in the vast majority of cases are nationals of their own country. Whether structured as non-profit NGOs or for-profit companies, these intermediaries organise, oversee, and sometimes implement the project in question. They will often have an in-country project team—or “project implementation unit” (PIU)—led by an expatriate chief of party who works directly with his or her counterpart in the transitional country's institution.

Using Western intermediary organisations to run projects is an ingrained habit for some aid providers. Those who favour the method argue that outside organisations can bring special expertise from similarly large-scale projects in other countries. Although they are not likely to say so aloud, Western donors also rely on this method because in their view it is faster to assemble, reduces the risk of misspent money, assures greater control over the work, and allows aid budgets to expand or contract without increasing the number of permanent civil servants.

Yet, project support of this type tends to experience at least three major problems. First, as the projects are designed, overseen, and evaluated by outside organisations, the people and institutions of the recipient country often feel little commitment to helping it succeed. Second, such projects rarely strengthen the managerial capacity of recipient countries' institutions, whose weak performance is the reason for the project support in the first place. Instead, institutional capacity remains on the side of the Western intermediary organisations. Third, the approach tends to involve much greater overhead costs and create a local elite of consultants who are highly paid, often deforming consultancy salaries in the local market.

While there are indications that project support is being rethought (e.g., foreign governments increasingly emphasise the need to localise aid), this has not yet fully translated into practice, as many aid providers continue to use externally supported bodies such as PIUs situated at local ministries to help manage the implementation of major projects. For example, despite a series of shocking scandals surrounding U.S. assistance in Iraq, involving billions of dollars of misused aid, the U.S. government is still the largest user of for-profit contractors. Even the U.S. government's own oversight mechanisms have pointed out major problems with these services.

Chronic Resolutions for Doing Better

Citing a long, aspirational list of intended best practices, Western aid providers—governmental, inter-governmental and private—habitually say they want their assistance to be tailored to the local context, coordinated in its different parts, based on genuine partnerships, operated with a long-term perspective, flexible when circumstances shift, and transparent in implementation.

Yet, rather than achieving these aims—so often highlighted as “lessons learned” in internal evaluations and public declarations—the same problems occur repeatedly across the years. This fact naturally puzzles recipients. Why do assistance providers keep behaving in these ways when they have pledged so many times to work differently? And why do transitions seem to bring out the worst rather than the best practices in them?

Below we look at the most familiar “best practice” resolutions of aid providers and consider why and how their own actions make fulfilment of the resolutions an elusive goal.

Take local context into account

Probably the most common “lesson learned” that aid organisations put forward when doing retrospective analyses is their need to do a better job of fitting assistance into different national contexts. This has led, for example, to increased political economy analysis by some assistance providers as a way of understanding why policies do not work. Yet, the great majority of aid providers fail to invest the necessary time and money to try understanding the wide ranging and opaque set of actors and influences circulating in any transitional context, including those that challenge deeply entrenched power structures around such sensitive issues as caste, religion, race, and ethnicity. Likewise, most aid providers continue to downplay history, wanting instead to look forward and maintain a strong belief that change is possible in all environments. In addition, the previously mentioned assumptions about transitions all come into play.

Ensure local ownership of local problems

Western aid providers consistently emphasise the importance of “local ownership” and “country-led” processes of change. One of the ways they have sought to ensure this is by pushing local governments to conduct public consultations earlier in the policy cycle. Another is to organise donor conferences where the transitional country’s government is able to present its list of priorities. However, the reality is that aid providers do not come to these initiatives with empty agendas, and have difficulty shedding their national or institutional interests. And even if they could overcome these problems, acting in harmony with local priorities in a context as contested and quickly changing as a transition will always present its own challenges. In the aftermath of wars and dictatorships, many new actors can quickly gain power, diffusing the singular centre of decision-making and control that may have existed in the country’s less democratic and peaceful past. As a result, channelling aid in line with local ownership only becomes harder in a transition.

Pursue equal partnerships

Closely tied to the concept of local ownership, “partnership” has been a buzzword for more than a decade. Aid providers are no longer providers and aid recipients are no longer recipients; instead, everyone is a partner. However, merely using the word does not change the power imbalances that are an inherent part of the aid relationship. These parties can never be equal, and the relationship (one side gives, the other receives) can never be natural. Compounding matters, assistance providers remain deeply reluctant to let recipients take the lead, because most still have a strong sense that their knowledge, skills and experience are superior to those of the recipients—not least in transitions when a society and state are struggling to recompose themselves after a period of political violence or institutional failure.

Make assistance more accessible

Western aid providers would like to make their financial and technical offerings more broadly accessible in transitional countries, reaching diverse groups beyond the elite. Fortunately, in the age of the Internet and social networks, this is much easier to accomplish. Yet, the age of greater accessibility to transition assistance has not arrived. It is still rare for the offices of aid providers to exist beyond capital cities, even though local needs are often greater elsewhere in the country. Older and better-networked NGOs still prevail over the unknowns. Providers continue to gravitate toward English-speaking locals with Western habits. Aid applications and terminology still form barriers. And the sheer crush of actors and information makes the aggregate offerings less rather than more accessible to the newcomer.

Coordinate more effectively

Western aid providers incessantly proclaim the need for greater coordination among themselves, yet struggle to achieve it. At the country level, they often share basic information with each other about their activities, or pool resources through institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and the UN’s development and humanitarian agencies. However, few manage or seek to go beyond this to ensure deeper forms of coordination. One reason is that incentives to behave differently are minimal; and there is no punish-

ment for setting off on one's own. In addition, transitions are competitive times. Individual aid organisations tend to want their own bilateral relations with local counterparts, conduct their own assessments, and plant their own flags—especially when they are relatively new on the scene. Moreover, few wish to subordinate control of their efforts to another aid provider—particularly on prominent issues such as constitution-writing, or sensitive ones such as SSR. Even groups of like-minded assistance providers, such as those from the Nordic countries, can be difficult to point in a single direction. With EU member states, which have every reason to coordinate, national prerogatives often prevail to the detriment of coordination. The old saying that “everyone wants coordination but no one wants to be coordinated” still applies—to providers and recipients alike.

Build sustainable solutions

Designing aid with a long rather than short-term focus in transitional countries is evidently desirable, given that complex social and economic problems cannot be solved quickly, and permanent public goods like the rule of law take considerable time to emerge. For example, ministries in Finland now have cells that not only report to the prime minister on the longer-term implications of their aid efforts, but also establish future aims and then work backwards to tease out the policies that might move the transitional country toward those targets by a specific time. The aim is to get politicians to think beyond the electoral cycle on issues that might require decades to work through. In addition, some private assistance providers have shown that long-term perspectives are much more effective at delivering change. This is the case, for example, with the Aga Khan Development Network, which systematically makes long-term commitments, and with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which has focused on building a sustainable sector of local philanthropy in various transitional countries, knowing that outsiders will not stay the course. Yet, most aid providers lack the patience or means to consummate their sustainability ideals. In part, this is due to bureaucratic budgeting processes, which rarely allow commitments beyond a few years. Politics also play a role, as foreign governments, ministers, civil servants and diplomats come and go, leading to frequent program cancellations and disruptions. But independent of that, there is rarely the required depth of trust in provider-recipient relationships to enable long-term commitments.

Be flexible

Another proclaimed “lesson learned” is the need for greater flexibility in Western aid delivery systems operating in transitional countries, so that when things go awry there is the possibility to adjust and correct. For instance, some private human rights funders provide general support funding to civil society groups, which allows for mid-course strategic pivots. Some governments and intergovernmental organisations have taken similar steps, by establishing rapid-response bodies that can make catalytic grants in difficult cases (e.g., the European Endowment for Democracy or USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives). Yet, these remain the exception. Overall, flexibility is another objective that tends to be stymied by bureaucratic processes—especially, but not only, in the case of governmental aid providers. Their transitional country policies may be developed with a clear set of aims and a plan for implementation, but changing them involves going back to the bureaucracy for approval—a time-consuming process that does not help donors push this year's money out the door. In addition, aid officials (and implementing organisations in general) must satisfy a rising demand for quantitative proof of impact, without accompanying incentives for admitting problems or failure. As such, when flexibility is needed, it is rarely requested—thus maintaining the inflexible status quo.

Break down silos

“Stove piping”, “silo building”, and other construction metaphors often appear in critiques of aid, and they will for some time to come. Bureaucracies in any large organisation are designed around functional and geographic divisions—not end results—and thus they will inevitably find it easier to compete for resources, manpower, and expertise than to integrate their work. Specialisation in the aid industry has worsened the problem, as different sectors engage less and less among themselves. And if competition remains intense within national bureaucracies and organisations, it only gets worse when different states

try to work together—especially in the competitive atmosphere of a transition. Nevertheless, any effort at integration is better than none, provided it is embedded in a larger overall strategy that avoids trying to do everything at once. At the very least, private actors, with their comparative flexibility, have greater ability (if not always greater will) to use and to foster more integrated approaches to the multidimensional challenges and opportunities of transitional countries. Some funders, such as the Compton Foundation and Ford Foundation, are attempting just this. Time will tell if it can become a trend.

Mainstream gender

Aid providers, especially Western aid agencies and intergovernmental organisations, expect attention to the gender dimension of projects they support. They demand a focus on participation by and measurable impact upon women and girls in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of most democracy or peacebuilding programs. The policy rationale is clear: females constitute half of the population, can bring different perspectives and values to complex projects, and compared to men are more likely to be adversely affected if the transition stalls or fails. Yet, despite high-profile efforts to put gender analysis and mainstreaming into practice (e.g., UN’s resolution 1325 on “women, peace and security” and the ensuing national action plans), this is an area where superficiality and box-ticking tend to prevail. Reports submitted by aid recipients to donors might get a pass by simply declaring, without further detail, that “the gender dimension of the issue was taken into account” in the particular project or publication, or by strategically inserting pro forma references to “women and girls”.

Increase transparency

Most assistance providers claim they want to work in ways that are more transparent—for example, by openly articulating their national priorities, publishing budget information, and offering competitive procurement procedures. Yet, despite the disappointment of many aid efforts and projects in transitional countries, there is hardly any available data on the unsuccessful cases because few assistance providers invest the time in studying their failures, and even fewer are willing to make such information public. The price of revelation, it would seem, is considered too high and best avoided. The paradox is that none of this appears to be deterring a majority of aid actors from imposing higher standards of transparency on their partners in transitional countries. The expectation of transparency is rarely reciprocal.

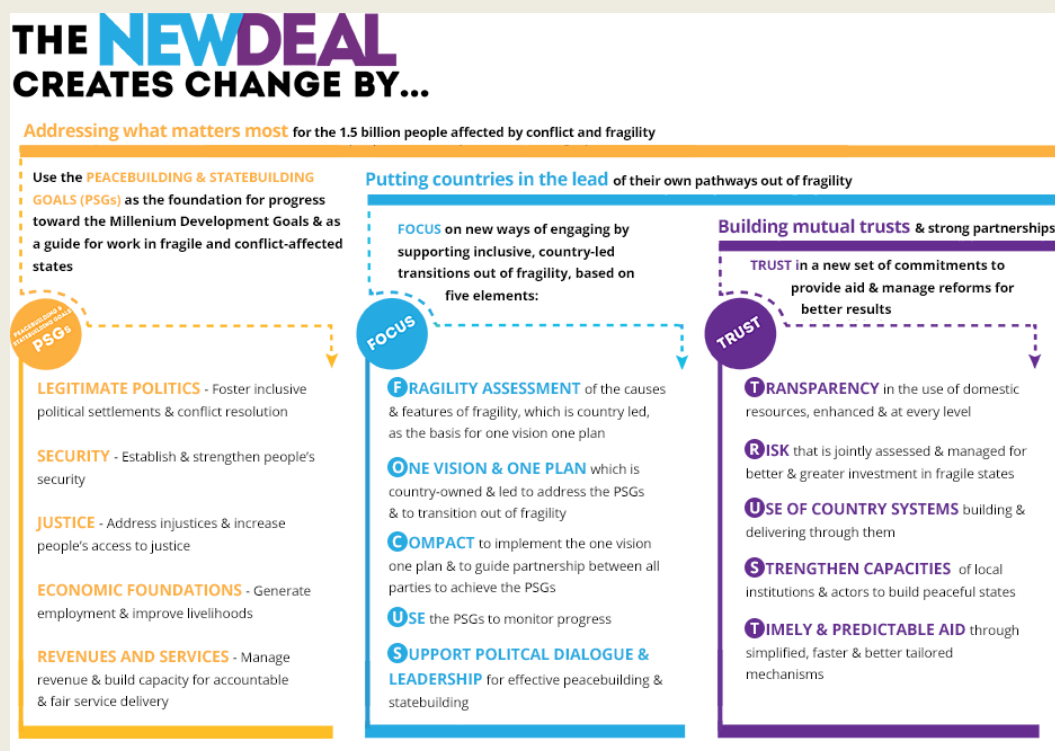
Strengthen monitoring and evaluation

Aid providers are less confident about project impact than they were in the past, and increasingly emphasise the need for recipients to monitor and measure the results of their work. This trend is not unique to the aid world, but reflective of a broader movement in Western societies in favour of data and evaluation. However, it is very difficult for transitional country recipients to make reliable attribution claims regarding the impact of any democratisation or peacebuilding activity they conduct, because there are usually too many other variables at play. Moreover, evaluation is time consuming and resource intensive if it is going to be done well. Yet, instead of acknowledging this, what prevails is a kind of “wink and nudge” system: recipients pretend to do rigorous self-evaluations, and providers pretend not to notice their superficiality.

Resolutions in the New Deal and the Busan Partnership

Two international frameworks produced in 2011 and endorsed by a wide range of international aid providers lay out the basic principles of how providers and recipients should henceforth work together: the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (New Deal) and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (Busan Partnership). Both reflect high ambitions but have had only limited impact in the short time since they were adopted. Many more years will be necessary to see if the efforts they initiated can become effective.

The New Deal is aimed at improving aid outcomes in fragile and conflict-affected states, and emphasises using the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs—noted below), developing country-led programs to overcome fragility, and building mutual trust and strong partnership between aid providers and recipients.



Source: [International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding](#)

The trial period of the New Deal was between 2012 and 2015. An [independent review](#) of the New Deal published in 2016 by the NYU Centre on International Cooperation found that the biggest impact was on discourse, with little impact on donor behaviour. A different [report](#) produced by the Brookings Institution concluded that, despite modest progress, efforts to implement the New Deal had overall been “characterized by unmet conditions, unrealistic expectations about timeframes, and a lack of sustained dialogue about the causes of conflict and fragility.” Among other things, the report cites donors’ concerns about the pilot countries’ actual commitment to use the PSGs to foster inclusive dialogues that address the roots of fragility and conflict—and on the other side, pilot countries’ concerns about donors’ commitment to genuinely share risk and use and strengthen country systems.

Similarly, the Busan Partnership—which is about development cooperation in general and not about fragile states in particular—includes pledges to respect national agendas, to recognise and manage risk rather than to seek to avoid it, and to encourage South-South cooperation. The Partnership also emphasises the need to work more closely with the private sector, delegate more powers to aid staff working in the country, and allow recipients to make the key decisions on how the money is spent. Importantly, it also includes a commitment on the part of recipient states to support an enabling environment for independent civil society groups viewed as key partners in securing successful development outcomes.

Ultimately, both Busan and the New Deal represent serious efforts by providers and recipients to reform aid’s worst syndromes. In the next chapter, we offer ideas for the additional steps that can be taken—in particular by aid *recipients*—to bring about their greater fulfilment.

Learning from Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been something of a laboratory for transition assistance. From the [Bonn Agreement of 2001](#) to the [Tokyo Declaration of 2012](#), the country has been through a continuous series of ambitious aid accountability processes, but with mixed results. None of the processes has tackled the core problems: an excessive emphasis on security over development, the corruption of the government and the aid sector, an overly centralised government structure, and the lack of real ownership by Afghans over most areas of policy.

Afghanistan has seen some significant improvements in many areas, namely health, education, and economic growth, albeit from the very low base of life under the Taliban. Yet, in areas such as security, justice, governance, and democracy, the results have been poor—particularly considering the enormous sums spent. The country has become a by-word for violence, corruption, and political chaos even after receiving tens of billions of dollars of assistance. The state barely functions outside Kabul (and other major cities) and the country faces an insurmountable insurgency by the Taliban. Corruption has been a corrosive force within the government and security structures, but also in the way aid has been managed through unaccountable mechanisms and for-profit companies.

Afghanistan was supposed to be about local ownership, coordination, mutual accountability, and Afghan mechanisms. However, after the announcement of each new process, slippage began. Coordination mechanisms that were supposed to be focused and lean soon became bloated, and those who were being coordinated soon started to resist. Major donors such as the United States, Iran, Japan, and Saudi Arabia mostly ignored the mechanisms, focusing on their preferred areas and methods. Spending, particularly by the United States, was driven by donors' domestic and military concerns and timetables, with little reference to Afghan plans. For instance, at a 2008 Cabinet meeting, the Afghan government decided to institute a ban on all private security companies—such as Blackwater and Dyncorp—operating in the country. Shortly thereafter, the Policy Action Group—a committee composed of Afghan ministers and international agencies, especially those from key donor countries—successfully pressured Afghanistan to lift the ban by threatening to suspend at least half of all aid projects and to cease NATO offensive operations. ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#))

By the time of the donor conference that produced the Tokyo Declaration of 2012, some of the lessons were already clear—and the will to address them seemed present. There was a new long-term approach spanning a decade, a tight set of accountability measures, and a commitment to put more money through the government budget. Once again, there were pledges of real coordination and improvements in the workings of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, with a particular focus on human security. However, in practice the Afghan side has not been held accountable (government mismanagement of the \$900 million Kabul Bank fraud being an example), nor have assistance providers (as evidenced by the ongoing lack of coordination and the reluctance to carry through on pledges). Today, spending on military support remains some 20 times that on civilian support, in contravention of so many prior pledges.

Tellingly, all of this coincided with the development (through meetings in Accra, Paris and Busan that lent their names to an optimistic series of statements) of a process designed to enhance donor coordination and end many of the bad habits on display in Kabul. But the words in these declarations were largely unmet by facts on the ground in Afghanistan, as security and domestic political concerns trumped aid effectiveness. Aid agencies have not been held accountable for their decisions and their willingness to go along with military plans despite the obvious problems with the militarisation of aid.

6 / How Can You Work More Effectively with Aid Providers?

As described in previous chapters, Western aid providers have constructed an elaborate industry of transition assistance over the past several decades, today operating in dozens of countries around the world. The system has a vast spectrum of actors, but reflects a complex mix of motivations and flawed assumptions, which carry over to the provider-recipient relationship.

As such, improved knowledge and understanding of how transition assistance works can be a first step for recipients in mitigating these problems and achieving better results. However, in this chapter, we go further and offer an assortment of practical suggestions on how to leverage this greater knowledge—with some suggestions more geared to government recipients, and others to civil society.

Our analysis is premised on the assertion that when recipients of transition assistance are better able to coordinate their agendas, advocate their true preferences, anticipate common problems, and find creative ways to bridge gaps, the stated aims of Western aid providers will stand a better chance of materialising in practice—to the benefit of all.

Envisioning A Better Approach

See it as a two-way street

Blaming aid providers for bad relationships and results is tempting—and defensible. They appear to be the ones with the power, money, and expertise, and hence should bear greater responsibility when disappointments arise. Yet, transition assistance is a two-way street. Recipients can, and must, do their part.

Aid recipients in transitional countries in fact have far more potential influence on aid delivery than most acknowledge or use. Although some recipients may lack sufficient experience, capacity, or legitimacy, they should make the most of the unique advantages they invariably do have. In particular, being greater masters of the local context, recipients can help providers understand how to channel aid better. When there is a gap in coordination or, conversely, a glut of actors, recipients are in a better position to bring the problem to providers' attention and offer smart solutions. Likewise, recipients are well placed to propose more flexible and workable models of partnership (as some G7+ recipient countries did through the New Deal), rather than just accept the parameters of whatever is on offer.

To be sure, the aid relationship will remain inherently unequal and awkward to manage. Yet, there is reason to believe that recipients can achieve more for their countries if—armed with a better understanding of the most common patterns and problems of transition assistance—they take a more proactive and honest approach in communicating their ideas, needs, priorities, and expectations. More than ever before, Western aid providers have committed themselves to listening to recipients (as reflected in scores of high-level forums and initiatives on “aid effectiveness” and fragile and conflict-affected states). As such, the timing is good for more honest communication.

Try meeting in the middle

While it is important for recipients to be more transparent about their needs and preferences in the transition assistance relationship, pragmatism is also necessary. Even the most reformist of aid providers does not have unlimited room of manoeuvre, but must instead cope with a wide range of bureaucratic, political, and ideological constraints. As such, the most realistic approach for recipients is to find the smart way to meet providers halfway.

In transitional countries, aid providers will continue to compete with each other and to seek projects that sell well at home and enhance their own sense of doing good. They will continue to have difficulties with even moderate levels of transparency about projects that are going badly (even though projects fail for a vast number of reasons, only a handful of which can be anticipated or blamed on malfeasance). They will also continue to struggle with increases in coordination, integration, flexibility, and customisation to context.

Recipients and providers are also likely to continue applying different logics vis-à-vis the aid relationship itself. Most providers arriving in a transitional country will continue to want to sign off quickly on contracts and proceed with the work, tending to see the relationship as transactional and transitory. By contrast, many locals will persist in expecting a counterpart that is committed to the long haul, and to building relationships of trust and respect that go beyond meetings and paperwork. It is unrealistic to imagine these divergences vanishing. Yet, if approached soberly, recipients can define a strategic middle ground that helps both sides do better. Indeed, that is what partnership is all about: recognising the competing constraints and perspectives of each side, and creatively identifying opportunities for mutual gain.

The fact is that there is no better alternative for recipients of transition assistance. Passively facilitating local aid dependence, and then complaining when the providers inevitably leave or prematurely cut programs, is hardly strategic. Likewise, actively playing assistance providers off each other to serve narrow and short-term sets of interests (such as getting more money) will merely bring out aid providers' worst instincts and practices. Such tactics have been tested unsuccessfully in transitional countries for nearly four decades. Superior alternatives exist.

Achieving a Better Approach

Arguably, recipients of transition assistance do not need a different agenda than the one already declared by aid providers. The latter's chronic resolutions on local context, local ownership, partnership, accessibility, coordination, sustainability, flexibility, integration, transparency, evaluation, and gender mainstreaming provide a ready-made framework for better relationships and results. Aid recipients need only make clear that they endorse this sensible set of principles and stand ready to help providers more successfully meet them.

Below are some ideas on how.

Local Context: Make it easier for aid providers to understand

- *Seek support for a one-stop "quality country information" portal.*
Using web and mapping technology, a user-friendly, independently-managed knowledge portal could serve as a clearinghouse for all transition stakeholders. It could include material about the most significant state institutions, guides to national politics, and sector-specific studies such as of the judiciary or army. Such materials would increase assistance providers' ability to customise their programs to your local context.
- *Communicate to assistance providers the hard-to-decipher values, customs and institutions that matter most in your society.*
For instance, a common practice in Indonesia is to offer training to *everyone* in an office, rather than to just those who need the training for a particular job. The premise is that this helps build and maintain cohesion in an organisation, which is considered paramount. Such norms may not be obvious to aid providers, and should be proactively explained.

- *Advocate the use of polling and social media to ascertain local preferences on key issues early in the transition, especially when these are rarely measured or frequently changing.*
Local surveys that target representative segments of society could ask respondents to rank and explain their expectations in a range of key areas, such as the improved delivery of basic services. Although such polling could never substitute for proper policymaking, it could be a valuable complement to it.

Local Ownership: Take charge of your needs

- *Declare your policy priorities for the transition (especially if you are a political or social leader) or aid providers will set them for you.*
The agendas and funds of aid providers crystallise quickly and can be hard to change once in place, no matter the subsequent trajectory of the transition. If there are going to be donor conferences seeking pledges for your transition, at least demand they hold it in your country and have your citizens as key speakers.
- *Insist on training **of** trainers rather than training **by** trainers.*
The default rule in transitions should be that training programs are deliberately designed to transfer capacity to targeted recipients who can subsequently serve as the local-language trainers vis-à-vis other parts of the population.
- *Identify your own training needs.*
Aid providers will determine the topics (and locations) of the training unless you speak out. If you want more on-the-job and comprehensive training—or if you need longer-term support for upgrading human resources in large institutions—it is best to ask for it clearly.
- *Resist conferences.*
Aid providers are not obligated to organise and fund big policy conferences. Most such events are a waste of time—and everyone knows it. However, assistance providers tend to overuse them as risk-free ways to spend money and be seen to be doing something early in a transition (and are willing in some cases to pay high per diems in order to inflate attendance). Be honest and help discourage them from organising *any* conferences.

Partnership: Try to make it real

- *Help find practical solutions to assistance providers' problems.*
You can introduce providers to key local actors who would otherwise be off their radar, make yourself available for phone and in-person consultations about the dynamics of the transition, and ask about their democratisation and peacebuilding goals, giving them your tailored recommendations about what niche they might best occupy. Your support of their objectives won't go unnoticed or unrewarded.
- *Understand that everything is more negotiable than you might think.*
Despite initial resistance, there is often latitude for concessions and exceptions to the standard provider-recipient contract. For instance, it may be possible to negotiate the freedom to change plans when your local realities shift (as long as the project objectives remain unchanged) or to refrain from using the assistance provider's logo on your outputs in politically-sensitive projects.
- *Suggest re-granting schemes that can help reduce donors' risks.*
Partnership with a local intermediary organisation that can re-grant funds to jointly-identified local recipients can sometimes offer a win-win arrangement for aid providers and recipients. This was done successfully in Northern Ireland, where EU-supported local intermediaries were able to use their greater legitimacy and broader networks to help aid funds go further during sensitive periods of the peacebuilding process.

- *The more capacity you have, the more control you should seek.*
Whenever feasible, insist that more aid is funnelled through your country's systems and institutions rather than through external intermediaries.

Accessibility: Help them broaden their reach

- *Advocate a formal provider-recipient dialogue.*
A common space for discussion can help all sides avoid problems and identify solutions. For example, a civil society forum could serve as a valuable platform through which aid providers and recipients could discuss and revise guiding principles of assistance for the country's transition.
- *Seek assistance on the basic modalities of transition assistance.*
For civil society recipients in particular, insist on regular information sessions early in the transition on the fundamentals of grantseeking and grantmaking, including how to put together an application and detailed budget, the differences between core and project funding, the standard grant reporting cycle, and so on. This will increase your ability to access more opportunities.

Coordination: Give them your support

- *Create a centre to facilitate coordination.*
Aid providers typically insist that they can only become more coordinated if locals make it easier for them (e.g., by identifying their transition priorities with clarity). However, since many transitional countries lack state institutions that can provide the direction aid providers expect, consider advocating the establishment of a mixed society-state national resource centre whose sole mission would be to make aid work for the country's transition. The centre could disseminate ideas and offer tailored advice to providers and recipients alike. It could provide continuous information exchange about key funding opportunities, events, training courses and research consultancies during the first years of a transition, tracking all projects and donations in a way that ensures that all sides have an ongoing "photo" of the aid circulating in the country, helping identify areas of resource excess or deficit.
- *Urge more organisation in the mapping of local actors.*
Aid providers have become enamoured of civil society mapping exercises, but you can insist that they pool their efforts, to avoid the phenomenon of scores of privately commissioned mappings being conducted but not shared between aid organisations. In addition, you can propose that they map *themselves*. The information could be organised into three categories—governmental, intergovernmental and private—and classified according to their respective areas of priority.
- *Reward good behaviour.*
Create a national prize to recognise the best transition assistance providers, with the top honour going to the leaders in effective coordination. This could help generate the kind of positive competition that aid providers have difficulty producing on their own.

Sustainability: Be disciplined and take the long view

- *Make the hard choices.*
Say "no" to aid you do not need or cannot put to good use. While assistance providers will often push large amounts of aid on to transitional countries, it is always best to accept no more than what you need to achieve your goals. Otherwise, you can find yourself doing unproductive things you never had in your plans, and distracted and unable to achieve the priority objectives you had once set.
- *Control the flow of meetings.*
Rather than agreeing (out of politeness) to hold individual meetings with each aid provider, government recipients should urge that visiting dignitaries be kept to a minimum. A member of parliament from your country would not get an individual meeting with the prime minister of even the smallest European country. There is no reason why scores of minor European legislators should be meeting your top officials, distracting them from more urgent national business.

- *Get local money into the game.*
A robust local philanthropic sector—something that can begin to be built during the transition—ensures that home-grown assistance providers can fill the gap when internationals inevitably lose interest in an issue or the country as a whole. In South Africa, Central Europe and the former Yugoslavia, a group of foreign foundations successfully made support for local philanthropic infrastructure (including philanthropy centres and membership associations) the central element of their grant-making. That is sustainability in action.

Flexibility: Help aid providers take chances

- *Prioritise flexibility over quantum.*
Having the discretion to move funds around is more likely to produce success than simply adding money to a badly designed project or a scheme that no longer fits the circumstances. Insist on flexible conditions, as a way for assistance providers to ensure their bets stand a better chance of success. In the end, one flexible euro will be worth more than five inflexible euros.
- *Advocate mixed portfolios as an ideal.*
Push donors to offer a blend of small exploratory grants (which can allow you to test ideas and initiatives) and longer-term assistance measures for the bigger bets. Too much of the former leaves little scope for an organised legacy, whereas too much of the latter ends up out of sync with the ebb and flow of the early years of a transition.

Integration: Emphasise the connections

- *Warn against the isolated fads.*
Help aid providers avoid the mistake of channelling money to the transition's faddish causes while ignoring others. If the police need reform, then prisons almost certainly do as well. If security services need training, their accountants and paymasters likely do as well. If doctors need education, then the drug supply chain likely needs reform.
- *Call attention to the transition's hybrid institutions.*
In the early part of most transitions, governments create a number of mixed-composition bodies mandated to play special roles. A constituent assembly may be responsible for developing a new constitution (e.g. Nepal), a truth commission may be authorised to investigate a legacy of mass abuse (e.g., South Africa), a special committee may be created to establish a political roadmap for the transition (e.g. Tunisia's High Commission for the Realisation of Revolutionary Objectives, Political Reforms and Democratic Transition established in 2011), and so on. With modest funds, assistance providers can be encouraged to boost the reach and impact of these vital bodies, which often exercise a role that integrates various policy realms and breaks down the traditional division between state and civil society.

Gender Mainstreaming: Try making it count

- *Ask providers for the tools to operationalise gender mainstreaming.*
Some aid providers have made gender equality a central element of their transition assistance, and taken the further step of creating "how to" guides for recipients (e.g., UNDP's [Gender Mainstreaming Training Manual](#)). Others have not done so, yet urge or impose mainstreaming requirements on in-country partners nonetheless. It is reasonable to expect such providers to give practical and actionable guidance, early enough in the process for gender mainstreaming to be more than a ticked box.
- *Encourage aid providers to conduct their own gender analysis.*
Analysing the needs and perspectives of women and girls early in a transition—before the details of a donor's local mainstreaming requirements are set—can be important. The analysis could in particular seek to identify major political, economic and social disparities between women and men. Because women's empowerment is often largely dependent on improvements in the dynamic between women and men, that relationship should also be part of the analysis ([Sida](#)).

Transparency: Assert your right to know

- *Ask about failure.*

Aid providers have decades of experience working in transitional countries in every region of the world. Inquire what lessons they have learned and how they are adjusting in order to do better in your own country's transition. Ask to see evaluations of comparable prior projects they conducted in your country or elsewhere. All too often, these are buried in drawers back at headquarters, rarely informing new directions or approaches.

- *Assess the experts.*

Feel at liberty to ask about the credentials of the external experts assigned (or self-selected) to provide ongoing technical assistance and advice to your country's institutions. It is likely that some of the experts would not meet minimal qualifications in their own countries and can offer little beyond their availability and willingness to work abroad, whereas others can bring real skills and knowledge transfer. You should know exactly what you are getting, and stipulate an expectation of high quality.

Evaluation: Honesty is the best policy

- *Be selectively critical of assistance providers.*

Constructive criticism is sometimes welcomed by aid providers, many of which want to perform better, and not worse. At first, deliver your criticism in a private meeting, as they will be more likely to respond positively if you do it this way. However, sometimes more public shaming may be necessary to capture their attention (and that of the larger aid community involved in your country's transition). In such instances, find allies and do your shaming collectively so that no one bears disproportionate risk.

- *Make internal learning your explicit goal.*

Evaluating your impact is something you must do to satisfy the accountability requirements of aid providers—and you will not get extra money to do so. However, ask their permission to evaluate yourself on internal learning processes, rather than external impact. Explain why that makes more sense for you, and debate the issue with the aid provider if you encounter resistance.

Conclusion

There is every reason to expect that new policy trends and fads in transition assistance will continue to occur. Impact measurement may be the proclaimed solution today, but aid providers' flexibility could be the one proclaimed tomorrow. Today, the dominant view could be that there are political and economic prerequisites for a country to democratise peacefully, whereas tomorrow the idea could shift again.

For an aid recipient, such constant pendulum swings between yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's common wisdom produce a range of negative emotions, from confusion to scepticism or dejection. The world of transition assistance, with its off-putting jargon, methods, and premises, is almost the opposite of inspiring.

Yet, for too long we have looked to solve the industry's shortcomings primarily from the *outside in*, concentrating on how to improve and fix the *supply side* of transition assistance. New resolutions, new frameworks, and new commitments by—and for—aid providers keep being churned out only to be replaced by others that recycle many of the same basic ideas.

We believe there may be a better way: one that involves flipping the mirror to confront the industry's problems not only from the outside in, but also from the *inside out*.

In particular, by empowering those on the *receiving side* of transition assistance with better information and knowledge about the aid system they are presumed to understand and capably navigate, there is a chance that aid providers' chronic resolutions—which reflect many values shared by recipients—will stand a better chance of materialisation.

One thing is certain: the status quo, unchanged, will only produce more disappointment and wasted opportunities to achieve better relationships and results in transitional countries. That is something which no one should tolerate.

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INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

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IFIT focuses its field work primarily at the national level, engaging with policymakers and leading civil society actors. It aims to reduce the often scatter-shot approach to seeking advice in times of transition, acting as a source of integrated advice and assistance for national actors on what they consider to be their most important transitional challenges and priorities. At the same time, IFIT offers strategic advice to donor states and multilateral agencies that can improve their efforts at policy coherence across agencies and borders, while also establishing operational partnerships with leading international organisations and peer networks.

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