



INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

## Policy Brief

# Three Building Blocks to Successful Inclusive Transitions

Seth Kaplan

Dozens of countries have experienced transitions out of armed conflict or authoritarian rule in the past four decades, yet few have met expectations, and fewer still have produced inclusive social contracts to guide the country's future. Instead, insecurity, weak institutions, and competition for power and resources often overwhelm attempts to forge a new social contract. Nowhere has this been more the case than in fragile states.

In recent years, there has been notable progress among policymakers in understanding the unique challenges fragile states face. There is, for example, a greater focus on issues such as inclusive politics, societal dynamics, and local solutions. Likewise, in-depth country assessments are now understood to be essential for developing a clear roadmap to reduce fragility.

Yet, increased understanding has not been matched by improvements in practice. Too often, the wrong issues are emphasised, possible trouble spots go unidentified, lessons gained from assessments are unused, and the links between fragility and conflict are underestimated. As a result, cycles of violence or authoritarianism reappear over and over again.

This brief outlines an approach more rooted in the often-overlooked societal and institutional dynamics that cause fragility. It is based on original IFIT research conducted across four regions and eight countries: Colombia, Guatemala, Ukraine, Macedonia, Tunisia, Libya, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

## The Three Building Blocks

As noted in a January 2017 [review](#) of donor implementation of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, efforts to build inclusive social contracts in fragile states in transition often reflect “an incomplete and inadequate understanding of the typically fragmented and highly contested politics of fragile societies beyond the formal representatives of their governments and administrations.” This conforms with IFIT's research, which suggests that a more integrated focus on reducing the underlying fault lines that divide societal groups and debilitate institutions, is more likely to overcome threats of renewed violence, social fragmentation, and repression.

*“A more integrated focus on reducing the underlying fault lines that divide societal groups and debilitate institutions is more likely to overcome threats of renewed violence, social fragmentation, and repression.”*

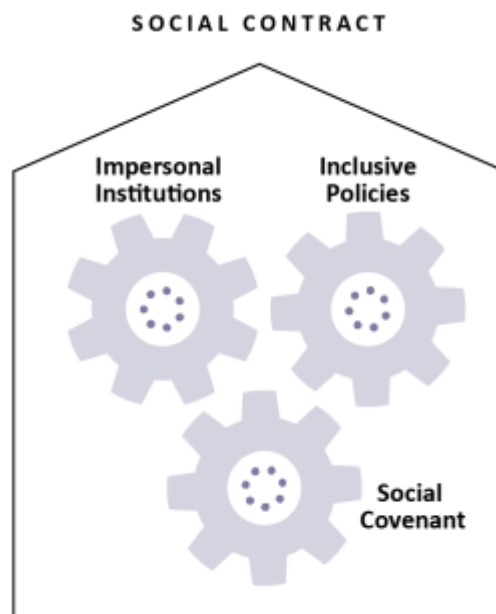
As argued in IFIT’s publication, *Inclusive Social Contracts in Fragile States in Transition: Strengthening the Building Blocks of Success* (forthcoming September 2017), a more comprehensive approach would involve a combination of the following building blocks:

- 1) the bringing together of different groups around a “social covenant” (see below) that bridges social divides and creates a greater common sense of nationhood;
- 2) the deliberate adoption of inclusiveness as a guiding principle across a broad range of policy areas (e.g. politics, education, rule of law, security, economics, culture); and
- 3) the establishment or strengthening of measures that enforce political commitments and reduce biases in how institutions work.

An integrated focus on these three building blocks would enable national and international policymakers and practitioners to better understand the processes that influence how likely a country is (or is not) to emerge from a cycle of conflict, to better assess conditions within fragile states, and to better design and implement programs that help forge a strong inclusive social contract.

### Interaction Between the Three Building Blocks

Understanding the interaction of the building blocks is key to understanding how change takes place. The formation of inclusive social contracts in fragile states in transition does not arise through the detached role of any one of these. The figure below visually illustrates this process. Each building block is represented as a gear to illustrate that if one of the building blocks does not function well, it can significantly slow down the others and have a deleterious effect on the formation of robust social contracts.



This three-part framework is important because the **relationship between groups in a society tends to operate in either a virtuous or vicious cycle** – depending on the groups involved – with the pattern being already well established before a transition begins. The nature of institutions, policies, and social interaction tend to determine how the cycle plays out – and whether it can be changed or not. In Sri Lanka, for example, tensions between Sinhala and Tamil

communities have a long-established pattern that has repeated itself over multiple transitions, making the adoption of far-reaching reforms difficult. In Libya, longstanding tensions between different tribes were a prominent feature of its transition landscape – and have prevented progress in almost all areas. In Guatemala, continuous elite domination of politics and corruption of weak institutions have yielded, and reinforced, social exclusion (based on racism) and social cleavages. By contrast, in Tunisia, the relationship between major opposition groups, forged in advance of the country’s 2011 transition, facilitated a virtuous cycle that enabled a peaceful transition to democracy.

#### A broader understanding of inclusiveness

The concept of [inclusiveness](#) used by IFIT is as much a method as an intended result, encompassing multiple dimensions at once: the who (e.g., ethnic, religious, caste, clan, groups); the what (e.g., politics, economics, culture); the how (e.g., process, dialogue); and the where (e.g., national, regional, local). It includes but surpasses the idea of treating minorities well or giving greater autonomy to breakaway populations; goes beyond the idea of elite pacts and accepted rules of the game; is contingent on neither a homogeneous or heterogeneous population, nor a wealthy or impoverished one; and transcends the realm of human rights, which is founded on the rights that groups and individuals have against the state, but not the consideration they require in relation to each other. Understood in this broad way, inclusiveness can act as a compass that steers elites and the public to build a common national identity and encourage everyone to begin to accept peers from other groups in a way previously unimaginable. Even in the worst cases, leaders can promote this ideal in their spheres of influence in the hope that their acts, over time, will produce momentum toward greater change.

### Hierarchies of Building Blocks

The most important building blocks for the development of an inclusive social contract are arguably **the degree of social cohesion and the independence of institutions** because of how they influence the capacity of a society to develop a virtuous dynamic built upon inclusion. Social cohesion – the product of multiple factors – affects the capacity of different parts of a society to work together, compromise, and make unpopular decisions (e.g. Tunisia). When such cohesion is absent, it has a stark influence on the choices leaders make (e.g. Libya, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Nepal).

*“Social cohesion – the product of multiple factors – affects the capacity of different parts of a society to work together, compromise, and make unpopular decisions.”*

Of similar **importance is the role of impersonal institutions**, which affect the scope for inclusive policymaking (the second building block) and equitable treatment of the various groups in a society. Weak institutions also undermine attempts to ensure that citizens gain from the transition as early as possible – which in turn is crucial to ensuring that the overall change effort retains enough support to withstand whatever setbacks occur. In Ukraine, elites

that run public institutions have often resisted change despite extensive social mobilisation and attempts at reform. Guatemala's efforts at institution building largely failed, leading to the domestic involvement of the United Nations, which established the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

On the other hand, **there appears more scope to achieve a symbiotic relationship between how inclusive policy is (the second building block) and the nature of institutions (the third), than on the forging of a social covenant across groups (the first building block).** Guatemala and Nepal have made halting progress on inclusiveness and institutions, but comparatively less progress on a social covenant. Ukraine has made progress on institutions and policy, but at the expense of a social covenant.

But the lack of a robust social covenant may sometimes reduce the pressure upon leaders to reform exclusionary policies and practices, thus having a detrimental effect on initiatives in those areas. Indeed, discriminatory attitudes, distrust, and negative perceptions about other groups (part of the first building block) can play a significant role in reducing the capacity of societies to improve institutions and implement inclusive policies (e.g. Guatemala, Nepal, Sri Lanka). In such cases, there can be a significant disconnect between formal initiatives promoting change and the behaviour of leaders, officials, and citizens towards one another.

## Creating Social Covenants (Building Block 1)

In fragile states, horizontal society-society dynamics have an important impact on how vertical state-society relationships evolve, and thus on whether a social contract can be fashioned and what its nature will be if eventually achieved. In such contexts, developing a “social covenant” that brings together various ethnic, religious, clan and ideological groups may be essential to progress on other fronts.

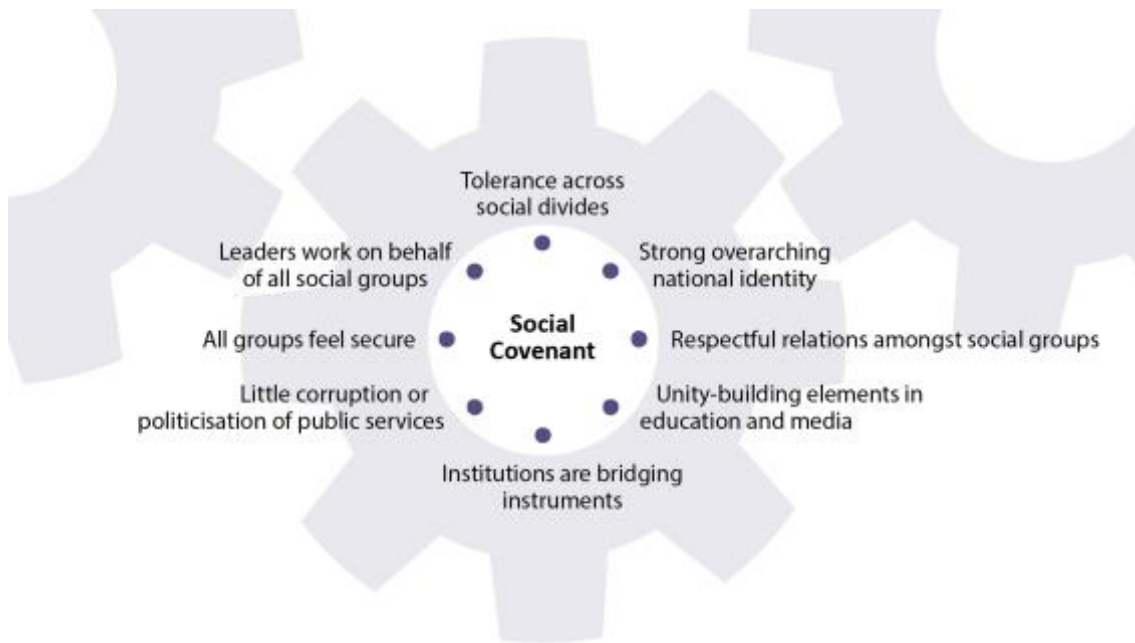
*“Social covenants build common identity, common values, and a common sense of purpose for the state.”*

Forged from negotiations among different groups and thus more akin to a horizontal society-society compact than a vertical state-society compact, social covenants build common identity, common values, and a common sense of purpose for the state. They define the origins and makeup of political society, fashioned with the understanding that a cohesive society is a precondition to a successful state. They are especially crucial to building legitimate political orders in fragile states, which lack a common national identity and have populations with stark differences in loyalties, values, and priorities.

All else being equal, a society that is able to reach agreement on its fundamental principles and values (e.g. who is or can become a citizen, what makes for a legitimate government, how to accommodate myriad ethnic, religious, and regional identities) is more likely to be able to forge a sustainable social contract, particularly when institutions are unable to equitably enforce rules and commitments.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Seth Kaplan, *Social Covenants and Social Contracts in Transitions*, Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2014.



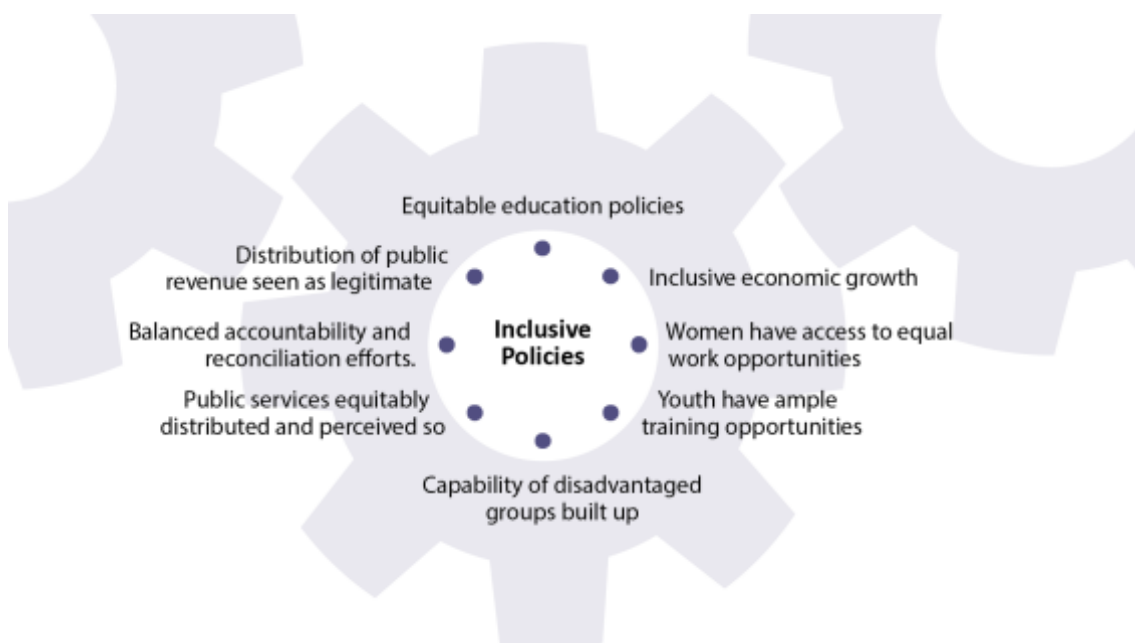
The following are among the recommendations resulting from IFIT's research on this building block:

- **Bring competing groups together before the transition.** Given the perilous nature of many fragile states, everything that can build up trust, cooperation, and a sense of common purpose across different groups can assist in bridging gaps when most needed.
- **Create unifying national identities and narratives that incorporate the different societal groups.** This is essential to building social cohesion and countering divisive narratives. It is also essential to reducing the importance of subnational identities and the grievances that they often produce.
- **Address the attitudes, perceptions and narratives that underlie mistrust and discrimination.** Ending intolerance and exclusion requires much more than new legislation and policies. In many cases, given the weak institutions of fragile states, changes on paper have little impact in reality. Creative social initiatives can go further.
- **Treat latent social cleavages seriously – and manage them before they cause further harm.** Too often, policymaker inattention to this issue has exacerbated latent cleavages, turning what might have been a minor dividing force into something much greater (e.g. Ukraine).
- **Increase social mobilisation to advance a reform agenda that unites people and strengthens institutions.** It is essential to clearly understand the specific roles of different social groups and to seek to identify those most influential and amenable to playing a positive role in uniting people and strengthening key institutions.
- **Use constitutional reform processes to address systemic issues such as national identity and the institutional framework.** This was done with some success in Colombia, Macedonia, and Tunisia. Incentives for performance (e.g. aid, trade) and monitoring (e.g., legislation, budgets) are essential to make this happen.

## Using Deliberately Inclusive Policies (Building Block 2)

Creating a more inclusive dynamic through focused effort over a wide range of areas, such as security, education, politics, and national symbols, is essential to facilitating social contract formation in places where women and different ethnic, religious, clan, regional, and ideological groups are not treated equitably by the state and its institutions.

In the best cases, inclusiveness becomes a compass that steers elites and the public to build a common national identity and encourage mutual respect and tolerance. At a minimum, leaders can promote inclusiveness in more limited spheres of influence in the hope that their acts, over time, will produce momentum toward greater change. Extending infrastructure to historically excluded areas, accepting more women into leadership roles, and offering minorities a chance to participate in national media programs all can set an example for others. Ultimately, all major segments of a society must begin to feel that they are included in governance processes and practices, and that they are equitably included in whatever political, social and economic gains the transition brings.



The following are among the recommendations resulting from IFIT's research on this building block:

- **Introduce policies geared to end discrimination in one form or another.** Guatemala's new constitution recognised the multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual nature of the country. Colombia guaranteed seats for certain disadvantaged groups and established new institutions to advance the interests of minorities. Nepal introduced new laws to increase minorities and women's access to public services, participation in civil service, entry into the work force, and so on. Such policies can produce momentum-building inclusive dynamics.
- **Ruthlessly monitor budgets and policy implementation for whatever inclusive policies are prioritised.** Peace accords, new social policies, and new legislation are part of any transition

out of war or authoritarian rule, but lead to little change (and loss of precious political capital) whenever money is not allocated or implementation capacity is lacking.

- **Ensure that language (and cultural) issues are addressed in a highly sensitive manner.** These issues tend to be contentious in times of transition in fragile states, oftentimes the source of bitter disagreement. Partly as a result, implementation of inclusive-oriented policies in this areas has been weak. Anticipating and accounting for the backlash such policies may generate from the dominant group is important.
- **Avoid punishing large numbers of lower ranking public servants from the previous regime.** One of the surest ways to undermine the chance of building an inclusive dynamic is to target large numbers of foot soldiers from a previous government, especially a sectarian-identified one. While investigating or prosecuting top officials, given the particular transitional landscape, may be justifiable, anything beyond that poses great risks even if it satisfies popular demands.
- **Carefully promote decentralisation to distribute power more equitably and increase the inclusion of previously marginalised regions.** Decentralisation is often essential to resolving conflicts or introducing a more inclusive regime, but such measures risk being held back by politics. In Sri Lanka and Nepal, majority groups have been reluctant to cede power. Ukraine has been reluctant to substantially decentralise power to its east, partly because of fears it will confirm the divisions in the country. By contrast, decentralisation was key to defusing the ethnic conflict in Macedonia and was a crucial spur to institutional reform in Colombia. Yet, even when successful in defusing ethnic divisions, decentralisation can bring out other problems in the form of corruption, capture by local elites, resistance by central elites, or poor implementation capacity. As such, it should be accompanied by a parallel effort to improve how local government works, including through appropriate resource allocation, controls and capacity building at the local level.

### Strengthening Institutions (Building Block 3)

Weak institutions in fragile states, unable to keep powerful actors in check, make the enforcement of political commitments and the reduction of inequalities hard to achieve during transitions. Yet, impersonal institutions are essential to safeguard social covenants and social contracts, maintain stability, and generally move toward a predictable and inclusive political process. Without them, one or more parties is likely to withdraw from a foundational agreement, torpedo its application, appeal to external actors to override it, or seek to use violence, money, or some sort of pressure to accomplish its goals.<sup>2</sup>

*“When institutions work equitably, important improvements become possible for historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups.”*

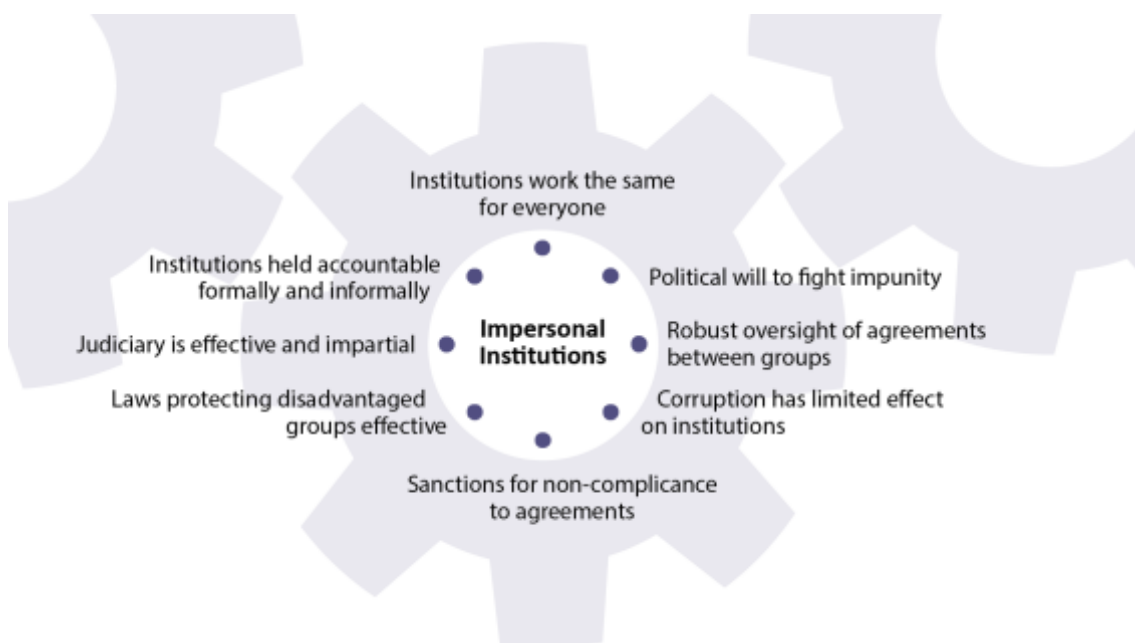
When institutions work equitably, important improvements become possible for historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and even members

---

<sup>2</sup> Seth Kaplan and Mark Freeman, *Inclusive Transitions Framework* (Barcelona: Institute for Integrated Transitions, 2015).

of the middle class who do not have the excess cash and connections needed to ensure fair treatment by public authorities in many fragile states. Many countries understood this during their transitions: Nepal established new organs to improve governance and tackle the abuse of authority; Colombia created major new independent institutions and checks and balances as part of its 1991 constitution; and Ukraine continuously has reformed its government in an attempt to reduce corruption and improve responsiveness.

Ultimately, impersonal institutions are needed to achieve fairness: the kind that makes all groups in a society feel they have a set of known and enforceable rights and remedies that cannot be overturned arbitrarily or ignored. In this sense, a country can never be genuinely inclusive until its institutions work equitably for everyone, including the powerful. That is all the more reason to start major institutional reform as soon as possible in a transition, when political capital is often at its peak.



The following are among the recommendations resulting from IFIT's research on this building block:

- **Introduce external anchors wherever necessary and possible.** An external anchor – for example, the UN-led CICIG in Guatemala – can restrain exclusive elites and oligarchies in fragile states where domestic institutions might be unable to do so on their own.
- **Invest more in the functionality of political parties that aggregate different identity and interest groups and operate in an institutionalised fashion.** Weak political parties (or groupings) reduce the capacity of states to address problems, integrate marginalised groups, and build social cohesion across groups. This happens because they are highly unrepresentative (Guatemala), overly leader driven with weak institutionalisation (Macedonia, Ukraine), corrupt (Nepal), or fragmented (Libya). Of the examined cases, only Colombia, Sri Lanka and Tunisia have comparatively healthier party systems.
- **Reform political institutions so as to make them more inclusive.** Despite its myriad problems, Macedonia has established a norm of multi-ethnic coalitions that has been crucial to stabilising the country. Nepal's reforms opened up its political system to many



more groups than before, increasing disadvantaged group participation in the voting booth and legislature. Although the country is deeply divided and on the whole less secure, Libya has overturned decades of authoritarianism.

- **Prioritise the reform of security forces.** Even in relatively secure contexts, the discriminatory practices of security forces, including the targeting of certain societal groups, can intensify societal divisions and hinder progress in other areas. Nepal gradually increased the number of disadvantaged groups in its security forces, though not quickly enough to head off the deep discontent reflected in the 2016 protests. By contrast, Colombia reduced the role of paramilitary forces in the 2000s and modernised its entire armed forces.

## Transversal Rules of Thumb

Beyond the specific recommendations above, the following are some cross-cutting rules of thumb that also resulted from IFIT's research:

- **Policies should more actively tackle the increasing or decreasing level of social and political polarisation in a given society.** Polarisation usually starts well before a transition fails and plays an outsized role in destabilising countries – making it a good indicator of rising risk. Nevertheless, it is rarely monitored and there are rarely any data sets that track its change over time in less developed countries. Developing new tools and instruments to assess the level of social and political polarisation and policies to address it should be a much higher priority than it is today.
- **Do not overestimate the ability of elections and new economic or social policies to stimulate social contract formation.** While these may be essential, they often produce much less change than expected and can be as much a hindrance as an aid to push progress towards an inclusive social dynamic. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhala majority has repeatedly prevented the kind of compromise that would satisfy the minority Tamils. In Ukraine, electoral competition for political power has repeatedly increased social divisions, rather than healed them. In Guatemala, democracy has repeatedly failed to empower disadvantaged groups. Yet, democracy (and the set of rules it provides for competition of power) has proved essential to bringing major groups together in Tunisia, provided a mechanism to incorporate rebel groups into peaceful politics in Colombia, and empowered civil society to challenge unaccountable politicians in Ukraine.
- **Focus on the small number of core issues that could strongly affect how inclusive dynamics are in each transition.** Certain issues can have a particularly strong impact in reinforcing a sense of exclusion and state illegitimacy: for example, a lack of security, especially when created by (or felt to be created by) the government; a deficient justice system; a stark lack of equal economic and public sector opportunities. Yet, it is equally critical to address symbolically important issues (e.g., language and culture) wherever possible. These often play a substantial role in increasing polarisation, if not addressed, by accentuating feelings and perceptions of injustice and exclusion.
- **Actively shape the incentives for local actors – whether individual leaders or groups – to act inclusively.** Any opportunity for a key group to gain advantage by excluding other groups needs to be identified and ideally eliminated as early as possible (as pressure can build from within a faction to act). Indeed, transitions are especially vulnerable when key leaders have a strong incentive to increase their support through actions that reinforce

existing social antipathies. Lustration laws are good examples of this. They are popular across a wide spectrum of groups, but can easily create a large group of disgruntled members of a former regime (who can become coup plotters or armed opponents to a new government). In Libya, such legislation was one of the key milestones in the country's downward spiral. By contrast, developing and promoting positive incentives toward inclusive behaviour (e.g., offering greater stature, more resources, personal financial rewards) can help generate stabilising social and political dynamics.

- **Prioritise the depersonalisation of national and local institutions much more than now.** Significant progress in bringing different groups together, negotiating agreements, and building a pattern of cooperation can easily be reversed if institutions are not up to the task. For instance, Libya made fleeting progress in 2012 and 2013 until the precarious nature of its institutions was exposed; today, there is neither consensus on a government, nor mechanisms to arbitrate differences between groups. In the case of Ukraine, Guatemala, and Nepal, progress has been held back by cronyism, corruption, and the capture of specific state institutions by oligarchs. However, in many of the cases, the problems vis-à-vis institutions are worse outside capitals and major cities, producing a detrimental effect on attempts to counter elite domination and social exclusion in many parts of a country (e.g. Colombia, Guatemala). As such, a much greater emphasis on improving the quality of national and local institutions early in a transition is called for.



INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

Sant Pau - Recinte Modernista  
C/ Sant Antoni Maria Claret, 167  
Barcelona  
08025  
[info@ifit-transitions.org](mailto:info@ifit-transitions.org)

For more information about IFIT, please visit the Institute's website: [www.ifit-transitions.org](http://www.ifit-transitions.org)