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Institutions for Sustainable Peace: From Research Gaps to New Frontiers

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In divided societies, characterized by an antagonistic segmentation among identity groups, formal state institutions are of paramount importance in regulating intergroup conflict. Institutional reform is thus an appealing option to shape such state institutions—the system of government, electoral systems and party regulations, territorial state structure, the judiciary, and the security sector—in order to promote sustainable peace and prevent the occurrence or recurrence of violent conflict. However, research is far from having arrived at a consensus about what institutions work where and how. Is the choice of institutional design in a postwar situation determined at all by expected political utility? What distinguishable effects can different designs have under what conditions? How do institutions interact—what role does the "concert of institutions" play in the impact on sustainable peace?

This debate is not confined to the ivory tower of academic research, but has important policy implications for national and international conflict management. Building political institutions for peace is high on the international agenda. In recent years, domestic and international reformers have (re)designed state institutions in postwar countries such as East Timor, Burundi, Afghanistan, and Bosnia to promote sustainable peace and democracy—with mixed results. Moreover, the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report "Conflict, Security, and Development," the UN Secretary-General's 2011 report on preventive diplomacy, and the UN's 2012 guidance note on mediation all emphasize the significance of postwar institutional designs. In 2005, the General Assembly and the UN Security Council explicitly mandated that the UN Peacebuilding Commission should "focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery from conflict."

Thus, closing the research gaps on institutions in postwar and divided societies not only advances the academic knowledge in the field, but speaks directly to current national and international peacebuilding agendas. In this

article, we discuss research gaps and avenues for more integrative research on the origins of institutions and their effects in postwar societies, and we identify the missing pieces of data collection in the study of postwar institutional reform.

Origins of Institutions in Postwar Societies

Why and how do particular political institutions emerge in some postwar contexts but not in others, and how are institutional origins related to their effect on peace? In answering these questions, the study of institutional engineering has so far neglected to comprehensively address three interrelated elements: causes and dynamics of war, internal elite dynamics, and external interventions.

First, we need to more systematically connect theories of civil war onset and war dynamics to theories of institutional design. If institutional reform aims at preventing the recurrence of organized violence, research on institutional choice should examine this reform process in the light of why societal conflict escalated into organized armed violence. Both the causes of war (be they motives, opportunities, or a mixture of both) and war dynamics (like conflict intensity) may crucially impact the design of postwar institutions. If studies on institutional reform then do not take into account causes that triggered the escalation of conflict, they are unlikely to explain the causal chain that connects institutional design and the prevention of a relapse into war.

Second, there is a lack of research on internal political and economic cost-benefit calculations of elites: Why and how do leaders choose particular institutions during and after a war-to-peace transition under the uncertainty of cooperating with former enemies? On the one hand, we are particularly missing studies that complement the rational actor assumption widely employed in political economy by exploring additional starting points for institutional choice such as culture, prospect theory, or path dependencies. On the other hand, political science and economics currently lack insights on the mechanisms that systematically connect the investigation of war economies to postwar institutions that foster peace.

Third, external actors, such as international organizations, play a significant role in determining institutional outcomes after violent conflict. The United Nations, for instance, deployed entire postwar administrations in East Timor and Kosovo, effectively governing the territories for several years. Yet we know relatively little about how international actors influence institutional choice in postwar societies. Which constellation of international actors in which particular setting is most conducive to creating or reforming institutions in postwar environments? What are the negative

effects of international involvement in institutional reform? In a related step, we must link this complex international dimension of war-to-peace transitions to local decisionmaking on priorities and postwar needs. Decisions about mandates, strategies, and implementation are largely top down and driven by donor interests, but implementation is frequently left to national actors (and sometimes receives scant international attention). Research must therefore generate systematic knowledge on which institutional arrangements work best to take into account local voices while planning, deploying, and implementing international assistance in postwar situations.

The Effects of Institutions in Divided and Postwar Societies

A second academic field covers the effects of different institutions on peace, conflict, and other institutions. Thus far, studies on the effects of institutions on sustainable peace have been empirically ambivalent and inconclusive. Especially the interactions between institutions—the concert of institutions—have thereby been widely uncharted. Finally, it remains unexplored how the effects of institutional design on peace are conditioned by noninstitutional contexts such as the ethnic or religious composition of societies. These aspects become evident when looking at each of the abovementioned state institutions related to sustainable peacebuilding in divided or postwar societies.

The practice of power sharing as one aspect of government design is of particular interest to the scholarly community when examining the mixed effects toward building and sustaining peace. While in practice often seen as a panacea for societies with polarized ethnic groups, research findings remain inconclusive about the conditions under which power sharing contributes to peace and if it is suitable for all kinds of divided societies. Different operationalizations of peace and of consociational designs make it difficult to compare findings of existing studies.

Related to this point is the relationship between power sharing and a dynamic democratic system. By incorporating power-sharing agreements between warring parties into a constitution, the expression of opposition might become strongly limited. Worse, some groups may be excluded from representation in the course of power sharing. As, for example, the 2009 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights brought to international attention, can Bosnia be a democratic, minority rights–respecting society if the presidency of the country always consists of a Croat, a Serb, and a Bosnian Muslim—while members of the Roma or the Jewish communities by law never have the chance to become president? More work is thus

needed on "postsettlement settlements" and the conditions under which agreements become obsolescent and need to be renegotiated.

There is also a lack of comparative, cross-country, and large-N comparisons of the role of electoral and party systems for peace in postwar societies. Under what conditions do ethnic parties increase violence? And what kind of electoral system works best to peacefully regulate conflict in divided societies? Some comparative studies point to the success of proportional systems, but they specify this in only Western democracies. Evidence of success and failure in postwar societies is missing.

The institution of the judiciary, forms of transitional justice, and their effects on peace in divided or postwar societies are still underresearched in quantitative studies. The findings on transitional justice and the rule of law as foundations for sustainable peace are mostly based on small- and medium-N studies on the Gacaca courts in Rwanda and the International Criminal Court (ICC). A contested area in the research on the judiciary is the role of the international community in postwar justice. Some scholars say international judiciaries are most promising for building peace, as they remove the judiciary from the conflict context. Others conclude that disembodied institutions do not have influence on the ground and lose any kind of domestic context.

Research on the impact of security sector reform (SSR) on peace in postwar societies also largely consists of case studies and policy-oriented reports. Not only lacking are more comparative, quantitative, and cross-regional or cross-temporal studies, but also better knowledge of the sequencing effects between SSR and other institutional reforms on peace. For instance, some argue that SSR needs to come first and a liberalization of politics in elections has to follow. But the recent case of Libya, where relatively peaceful first post–Muammar Qaddafi elections were held without an SSR program in place, opposes this point. Supposedly, a "zic zac" or "clustering" approach between SSR and liberalization may be the most useful; however, detailed research on this point remains missing.

We also lack knowledge of the dynamics and hybridity between formal and informal institutions. Researchers often only examine formal institutions on the one hand and informal arrangements on the other hand. However, there are many hybrid forms of institutional arrangements; for example, in the security sector. Frequently much academic emphasis is given to the reform of the national army or police as a main building block of security, but ethnic militias and neighborhood watches continue to operate—and are tacitly accepted—because they may more effectively guarantee security for the local population. Additionally, international organizations assume different degrees of authority in the provision of postwar security, from assistance in implementing disarmament and demobilization programs to deploying

peacekeepers and international police. The way in which international peacekeeping, national and reformed institutions, and local and continuous institutions interact in their effect on building peace and providing security is not on the research agenda, however.

Last, the academic community should explore more extensively the dynamics and interactions between contextual factors and institutions in their joint effect on peace. Societies may be divided along different politically salient group identities—ethnic, religious, ideological, or even socioeconomic. Consequently, which institutions best regulate what type of societal antagonism? And how can institutions react to changing group composition dynamics in divided societies? The example of Lebanon demonstrates the significance of this potential research question. Here, power sharing between the Christian and Muslim groups proved to be a too static solution because differential growth between the religious communities turned the former Christian slight majority into a minority in the Lebanese society, whereas the Shiite community became the largest. The fixed quotas in the power-sharing arrangement, however, were not renegotiated according to the changing dynamics in the country's divisions, and the resulting grievances played a large role in the escalation of the civil war (1975–1990).

Data Gaps and Methodological Challenges

The shortcomings in the study of effects of institutions on peace point to another aspect of research on sustainable peace: methodological challenges and related gaps in empirical data.

Methodologically, a possible explanation for ambivalent and inconclusive findings on institutional engineering can be a bias in the selection of cases for the study of institutional effects on sustainable peace. Researchers tend to examine situations that have previously been affected by organized violence, instead of additionally considering "the dogs that never barked" in their research designs: the cases where we would expect armed conflict to break out, but that instead remain at peace. The nonescalation could point to the fact that institutions are in place that provide for successful conflict management and sustainable peace.

Moreover, many studies do not systematically include the conditions under which postwar institutions emerge in their analysis of the effects of institutions on peace. Yet institutions are most likely endogenous to conflict risks. Thus, more methodologically rigorous research is needed to isolate the independent effects of institutions.

Concerning data gaps, many of the outlined research questions may not even be possible to address, because for some topics, time spans, and geo-

graphical areas, empirical data are not yet available. The scholarly community is likely eager to use valid, reliable, transparent data with the broadest possible temporal and geographical scope, and with—at best—no single cell in a data file coded as missing. But only a few researchers actually embark on the painstaking process of collecting such information. Some research topics on institutions in divided societies thus cannot draw on quantitative data usable for statistical analysis. For instance, we are still lacking global databases on security governance in postwar societies, such as SSR programs. The evidence on this concept often remains anecdotal and we are virtually unable to conduct a global, statistical analysis of the impact of different SSR designs on postwar peace.

For other institutional arrangements, much of the quantitative data at hand are available only in the traditional country/year format. The current trend of disaggregation in conflict data (where, in recent years, many georeferenced event databases have emerged, such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset [ACLED], the Social Conflict in Africa Database [SCAD], or Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Georeferenced Event Dataset [UCDP GED]), has not yet reached the classic institutional data. Additionally, disaggregated conflict databases are often available only for sub-Saharan Africa, leaving out other geographical areas. Not only does this mean that we have no access to robust, interregional comparisons of the causes and effects of single conflict events, but this data gap makes it effectively impossible to answer more nuanced research questions on the impact of institutional designs on sustainable peace. Yet it is the subnational institutions—the local elections, the village council, the district administration—that individuals in conflict-prone societies are primarily in day-to-day contact with and that could be a direct cause or effect of organized violence.

Finally, in the area of data on diverse and divided societies, even the more sophisticated studies on the impact of divisions in a given country can often draw only on snapshot or outdated data, such as the notorious Atlas Narodov Mira from 1964. Hence, with these data at hand it remains impossible to answer a research question on the dynamics of divisions or on changes in a country's composition of identity groups, for example, after armed conflict and forced displacement. The above-mentioned case of Lebanon demonstrates, however, the importance of such divisional dynamics in the study of institutional effects on sustainable peace.

New Frontiers for Research on Institutions for Sustainable Peace

We still know too little about the origins of postwar institutions, their respective effects on sustainable peace in societies emerging from violent

conflict, and the relationship between the roots of institutions and their performance. Often, we lack high-quality data to address a substantial part of these questions. Therefore, future research must more rigorously address the causes and dynamics of war, the internal elite dynamics of domestic politics, and the external influence of international actors in the study of the emergence of postwar institutional design. We must furthermore critically examine how these elements relate to the performance and effects of postwar institutions, and we need to better understand under which conditions the concert of political institutions results in a violent cacophony or peaceful harmony.

Not only the recent events of the Arab Spring but also ongoing violent conflicts in places such as Afghanistan or South Sudan point to the persistent relevance of finding answers to these questions. More integrative research in the field of institutional engineering is thus needed in order to close the highlighted gaps, to provide relevant policy advice to domestic and international actors engaged in peacebuilding, and to contribute toward improving the lives of people affected by armed conflict.

Note

Here we have highlighted the results of the debate of the first Institutions for Sustainable Peace (ISP) network conference in Berlin in September 2012. The international research network ISP aims to close at least some of the gaps identified above through joint research projects and publications, academic exchange, a series of conferences and workshops, and a collection of missing data. Based on the results of these engagements, the ISP network seeks to inform policymaking and national and international practitioners. ISP is funded by the Leibniz Gemeinschaft and hosted at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, with core cooperation partners at the University of Oslo/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO); Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University; School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), London; and Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. For more information, see www.giga-hamburg.de/isp.

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