

## **People, Aid and Institutions in Socio-Economic Recovery: Facing Fragilities**

Edited by Thea Hilhorst, Bart Weijs and Gemma van der Haar. Routledge, London 2017

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Countries coming out of conflict face challenges of immense complexity. A fragile peace requires robust security. Refugees and displaced citizens have to be resettled. Roads need to be repaired, if not built. Clean water needs to be sourced. Schools should reopen, if any are left. Health facilities must serve rural communities as well as urban centers.

Agriculture needs to be revived, often only after landmines have been removed. Courts need to function, police to regain trust, jails to be updated. Basic enterprises should be encouraged to invest in the future. All this, and much more, has to happen simultaneously, and if one building block fails, the entire construct becomes unstable.

This would be hard enough for any country coming out of a brief crisis, but after protracted civil war, the underlying hatred lingers. An entire generation that has missed years of schooling becomes an angry security threat, the talent needed to take on the daunting task of recovery has left the country, and there simply are no doctors, lawyers, agronomists, teachers, or administrators in sufficient numbers to pick up the pieces. The country is still traumatized. Now what?

Here is where the aid industry comes in: the UN agencies, the World Bank, the IMF, religious organizations, NGOs of different plumage, and private sector entrepreneurs all breeze in with their own tool kit, their own policies, their own sources of funding. Have we learned by now what works, what is useful, what should be avoided?

The authors who came together in this carefully curated volume do not think so. In a range of case studies covering three continents and numerous scenarios, they report on their observations “from below”. Often living with communities for extended periods, they go beyond the easy phrases such as “empowerment” and “national ownership” to look at the implications of such mantras in reality.

They do so from the conceptual perspective of “socio-economic recovery”, the awareness that the social and economic dimensions of development are all facets of a complex system full of feedback loops, where the local and the national, the personal and the institutional, the ideological and the pragmatic all interact.

The editors have drawn five major conclusions from these case studies:

- People play the key role in reconstructing their lives and finding ways to access markets, authorities and aid;
- Aid actors are also socially embedded;

- Recovery involves overt and covert contests over the prospect of development;
- Micro-politics of recovery matter;
- Institutions in fragile settings may acquire properties of rational institutions.

These findings are each at the same time sobering and insightful, and as such, embody a critique of current aid policies and practices. This review should encourage the reader to go and get hold of the book, and it should not serve as a summary, but three chapters could be cited that each illustrate one of these insights.

In chapter 8, the authors (Patrick Milabyo, Jeroen Cuvelier and Thea Hilhorst) examine the efforts of the International Rescue Committee to implement a community-driven reconstruction project in a cluster of small communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The assumption was that the local population would gladly volunteer its labour to reconstruct a school or a road: the finding was that the designers of the project had not taken into account the long and brutal history of forced labour in the Congo, somewhat dampening the locals' enthusiasm to work without pay. Why did it succeed in one village, Muli? Because there the project provided materials for the reconstruction of a school that had already been started earlier by a local church: it was the villager's choice, not a component of an externally driven aid enterprise. See lesson one.

In chapter 10, on aid, security and access for recovery in South Sudan, Bram Jansen describes how aid resources can actually bring fuel to the conflict, confirming Mary Anderson's observations in her landmark "Do No Harm". Jansen then examines the traditional security strategies: deterrence, protection and acceptance. Obviously, aid agencies have few deterrents that can match the firing power of irregular forces or hostile armies, and hiding behind layered perimeters of concrete and barbed wire does little to endear them with the population. So Jansen describes how agencies handle the third strategy, gaining acceptance, in their transactions with individuals and with institutions. Agencies that keep senior staff at the same posting for a protracted period often have the edge, as they can develop personal rapport (think of the missionaries in earlier days, for example). Thus, he shows how at the personal level, managing social relations is essential. At the institutional level, however, agencies' mandates and governance structures tend to dictate their security policies – just compare Doctors Without Borders with the United Nations to witness completely different approaches to risk management. All this effectively underpins the editors' second finding.

In chapter 3, Anette Hoffmann compares the manner in which the United Nations, the World Bank and the OECD confront the challenges of early recovery after conflict. To do so, she examines and compares a series of major policy documents launched by each of the three players, and concludes that ideological bias is palpable in each of them. UNDP, in its papers, stresses the importance of livelihoods: this mirrors the position of its constituents, the developing countries. The World Bank stresses the importance of creating markets, reflecting the neo-liberal perspective of its shareholders, led by the US. The OECD, finally, wags a finger at the developing countries in reminding them of their promises to introduce good governance and fight corruption in exchange for funding: hear the voice of the donors behind Official Development Assistance (ODA). The

editors' contention in their third finding that "overt and covert contests" shape policy could not be substantiated more clearly.

In this manner, each chapter sheds light on some development practice or policy, observed empirically from nearby, that deserves to be looked at afresh from a perspective that questions how individuals and institutions interact in the subtle dance between donors and recipients as they go about seeking recovery in traumatized post-conflict settings. Mandatory reading for the mandarins in the capitals as well as those who humbly toil in the field.

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