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'Expect the unexpected': starting successful partnerships in fragile states

By Sue George

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Figure 2 In South Sudan the health service is delivered in partnership with local and internal NGOs. (Source: Paul Bronstein/Getty Images) [Figure description at end of document]

Fragile states – low-income countries where the state is weak due to disagreements over its legitimacy or capabilities – are often unable to meet their citizens' basic needs.

According to the World Bank, progress to ending extreme poverty is much slower in fragile states than elsewhere and it estimates that by 2030 40% of the world's poor will live in states that are fragile or affected by conflict. As a result, many organisations working in various parts of the development sector have projects designed to improve this situation.

But what are these interventions? How can governments, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society work together most productively? And how can any of those bodies learn from the experience of others?

These were some of the questions addressed at a recent seminar held at the Guardian's London offices in association with the Crown Agents Foundation – a non-profit-making body that oversees the work of development organisation Crown Agents.

The seminar featured a panel of experts who discussed these issues, with the participation of an invited audience including NGOs, the private sector, academics and civil society organisations.

The panellists

Jonathan Borsley, director for consultancy, Crown Agents
Carolyn Miller, independent consultant and ex-chief executive of Merlin
Andrew Bone, group head of government and industry relations, De Beers
Paul Smith Lomas, international director, Practical Action
Jo Confino (chair), executive editor, the Guardian

Jonathan Borsley

Borsley kicked off the event by looking at one of the key issues involved in working in fragile states: was it better to prioritise the short-term goals of service delivery or the longer-term change involved in sustainability and capacity building?

“When there is acute social need, the focus of the international community is on meeting basic needs as opposed to building longer-term sustainability,” he said. As a result, prioritising short-term goals can often seem inevitable.

For example, Crown Agents had been focused on long-term sustainability in South Sudan, recalled Borsley, where the government had not been much involved in the provision of healthcare. Instead, such services were being delivered by international NGOs and civil society across the country.

Crown Agents was working in the country as a managing agent, in partnership with local and international NGOs, as well as the government, to improve the health service. But then, in December 2013, the latest round of conflict erupted and the focus had to move back to short-term service provision. Borsley said:

“In fragile environments, you expect the unexpected.”

Carolyn Miller

Miller, speaking next, considered that it can be possible to both achieve “significant fixes” and deliver services. In particular, Miller addressed the role of government and the role in its citizens’ lives. She said:

“Generally [the state] does exist somewhere. But the community is clearly important and may not be used to the state working with them, needing help to become engaged with it.”

With reference to her experience with health services in fragile states, she continued: “Workers are also important to the success of any health project, whether they are NGO health workers, or local or ministry workers. The state is generally happy if you fill the gaps,” she said. “And even from day one you can build capacity”.

She also pointed out that fragile states are all different, and in some it may be easier to work in than others. In countries where there are fewer organisations involved, it may be possible to make direct contact with decision-makers from all sectors.

Andrew Bone

Bone discussed his experience of setting up the Kimberley Process in the late 1990s, which ensures that “conflict diamonds” do not enter the mainstream. This involved collaboration between De Beers, governments in Africa and the countries that buy diamonds, civil society and the private sector. “We were all experts. We had to get our act together,” he said.

De Beers had already had a long-term involvement with governments, including the public-private partnership between De Beers and the government of Botswana, which has now lasted 45 years (De Beers and the Botswana government have a company with 50-50 shares for each to work on the diamond mines).

Botswana has become a middle-income country benefiting from its valuable natural resources. However, De Beers had not had experience in dealing with civil society but saw clearly the need to be engaged with it as part of the solution.

The Kimberley Process was implemented in 2003. However, there are still challenges, Bone said, particularly in Zimbabwe where illegal diamond miners were murdered by government forces in 2008. He added:

“NGOs were frustrated with the pace of the Kimberley Process and there was an industry that was desperate. It was a great challenge for us to work constructively with civil society to get on top of this.”

However, it worked, Zimbabwe was subject to close scrutiny by Kimberley Process monitors over three years, blocking official exports of diamonds during that period, and eventually the country complied with the Kimberley Process.

Paul Smith Lomas

Smith Lomas then described Practical Action’s experience of working in Sudan with a network of 150 civil society women’s organisations which, in turn, reach 170,000 people. The project has enabled 6,000 families to switch from using charcoal for cooking, to using liquid petroleum gas stoves instead. Practical Action worked with a UK-based private sector carbon broker to help the network issue the country’s first ever carbon credits.

“We were the intermediary and sometimes the backstop donor, but it produced real results,” he said. There were many challenges – getting carbon credit accreditation was hard, as most of the private sector had no interest in going to Sudan. But Practical Action was in the right place at a time when there were few international NGOs working on development in Sudan due to the conflict. Smith Lomas said:

“The three key ingredients were long-term relationships, seriously flexible and friendly donors, and exemplary staff from north Darfur who were able to step above the conflict and position themselves as acting for the mutual good.”



Figure 3 The panel discuss effective interventions in fragile states with audience members.
[Figure description at end of document]

The discussion about partnerships continued, touching on many aspects of this complex issue. As one participant put it: “Groups don’t talk to each other, there is funding from different people with different ideas.”

Value of partnerships

Another pointed out that partnerships were increasingly seen as a necessity by donors, and these partnerships needed to involve the private sector and academics, not simply five NGOs working together. “Many development programmes are getting larger, so the hurdle for access is higher,” said Borsley. “SMEs and civil society are left out. The bar is set high.” Another participant mentioned that smaller NGOs were finding it harder to get involved.

Many of those attending also touched upon failure and the need to learn from it. Whether it was ineffective partnerships, culturally inappropriate projects, or those that just didn’t quite work, it was important to consider why – and yet this was done all too rarely.

Among other projects, a range of work done in Afghanistan, from microfinance to service delivery by NGOs, was mentioned. According to Smith Lomas:

“We suffer from a culture of success and hate stories of failure. Donors will think ‘we won’t fund them next time’. We need to be braver.”

One participant considered that the attitude of donors was changing, and they now wanted to know about projects that had not achieved what had been anticipated at the outset.

So was it the job of partnerships between the government and other development-related bodies to understand or work on the causes of any state's fragility, or should they confine themselves to dealing with the symptoms? One participant wondered if success should be focused on whether this underlying fragility was being addressed. Miller agreed that it was important, but donors often saw that as "mission creep", outside the remit of the organisation's work.

So what is the most important element in building these government/NGO/private and civil sector partnerships? One that both the panellists and many of the audience agreed on was trust between those involved in the partnerships.

Examples of trust mentioned by participants were:

Accountability and transparency in working methods
Buy-in from communities that have often been in conflict with each other
Dealing with complaints about tax evasion and avoidance, and the lethargy of governments

All these need to be taken into account. Each member of the partnership had something different to offer: for instance, participants heard that the private sector often had a longer-term perspective, and was able to take more risks than NGOs. De Beers, for instance, felt it was important to invest in a country over the long term – it took some 20–30 years between discovering raw diamonds to gaining any profit at all. Bone said:

"This is not just philanthropy, we have to engage with the local community. If we don't engage we are lost."

Borsley stressed that close engagement with civil society and local organisations maximised the chances of government and private sector partnerships working well. "A local organisation will understand the pressure points so much more than us," he concluded.

Figure descriptions (if required)

Figure 2: This picture shows a male white health worker working with a black woman and child.

Figure 3: This picture shows a panel of white experts answering audience questions in front of a screen on which there is the wording: 'Effective partnerships in fragile states: replicating success', and, below, '#futuresforfragilestates'.