Sustainable Development Programme

Building on international best practices: Understanding the context-specific challenges of promoting sustainable governance

Professor Paul Jackson[1]
Dr Sanne Weber[2]

Executive summary

The British Academy's *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. This brief discusses the research findings of projects in the *Sustainable Governance* thematic area of the programme, which also provide important lessons for policymaking. Recognising that the social, economic and environmental aspects of governance are interrelated, it suggests the need for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding sustainable governance. It argues that policies should be based on the needs and experiences of people involved. It furthermore posits that international best practices are often insufficient for improving governance, since they fail to respond to local realities, needs and challenges. Sustainable solutions to improve governance should instead be based on local and national priorities, and involve and strengthen local actors. A long-term vision is needed, which both responds to and prevents conflicts and disasters through combining development and humanitarian approaches.

Introduction

The British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. The 16 interdisciplinary research projects funded by this programme provide important evidence geared towards informing policies and interventions aimed at improving people's lives in developing countries, by reducing poverty and advancing socio-economic development. The programme has thus far supported research projects in three core areas:

[1] Professor Paul Jackson led the British Academy's Sustainable Development Programme 2016.
[2] Dr Sanne Weber is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Birmingham.

Sustainable Governance, *Sustainable Growth* and *Sustainable Human Development*. This brief discusses the findings of the projects in the *Sustainable Governance* thematic area and puts forward key lessons for policymaking.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) build on and complement the earlier Millennium Development Goals. They consist of 17 goals and 169 targets, based on the understanding that eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. Aspects covered by the SDGs are ending poverty and hunger, combating inequality, building peaceful, just and inclusive societies, protecting human rights, promoting gender equality, protecting the planet and its resources, and promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth which leaves no one behind. The SDGs also recognise that phenomena such as natural disasters, conflict, violent extremism, terrorism and related humanitarian crises, which can cause forced displacement of people, are potential threats to sustainable development.

The need for effective governance is underpinned by SDG 16, which calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, by providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The SDGs consider the promotion of the rule of law, the reduction of corruption and bribery, and the strengthening of national institutions to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime as crucial steps towards peace and security. Systemic transformation is necessary to bring about the state legitimacy which is crucial to achieve this. The first section of this brief sheds light on aspects that are relevant for increasing legitimacy. In order to ensure that people affected by conflict and disasters are better capable of responding to such situations, resilience should be enhanced. This is discussed in the second section of this brief. The final two sections explore two other factors that are important for effective governance: building capacity to increase the efficiency of security institutions in the maritime domain, and responding to the effects of migration caused by conflict on countries receiving refugees.

Legitimacy

The creation of trust in government and the building of state legitimacy are indispensable for promoting sustainable governance. Having examined the concept of state legitimacy in relation to the effective functioning of state organisations in situations of fragility, the project **Establishing State Legitimacy and Effectiveness in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Societies** concludes that the policies of both international actors and local governments often fail because they are not derived from a coherent analytic framework. Responses to the crises inherent in fragility are often quick and ad hoc, and therefore prone to mistakes. Furthermore, it is often imagined that fragility has one single root cause that can be addressed by international intervention or domestic policy adjustment. This approach fails to recognise that fragility is a syndrome of more complex circumstances that entrap societies. This requires a more comprehensive and long-term response. A common international approach to fragile states is to attempt to replicate the OECD model of governance in fragile contexts through elections and new institutions. But institutions will not be effective if they do not respond to countries' specific historical, economic and cultural contexts. Rushing into elections has often had counterproductive effects, by reinforcing ethnic or political divisions. Priority should be given to the creation of a common purpose and the building of optimal and effective institutions during an interim period of power-sharing. Different building blocks are needed to pave the way for democracy, such as the creation of checks and balances, the promotion of the rule of law and the protection of minorities. The process of establishing these building blocks to democracy is specific to each context. Finally, to make donor support more effective, receiving countries must develop their own plans. Instead of imposing strategies, donors should work with countries to implement plans based on local choices and priorities, as long as these are realistic and

inclusive of all groups of society. Citizens' trust in the state and the resulting state legitimacy are defined by the fulfilment of people's needs, which include both physical safety from conflict and natural disasters and economic guarantees in terms of employment and the security of a sustainable livelihood. Short-term outcomes through small, easy steps that yield quick results are therefore also important to building trust and legitimacy.[i]

A significant obstacle in the way of state legitimacy is corruption, since it prevents resources from being spent on combating poverty and improving state services. This often increases or sustains inequity. Although a lot is known about why attempts to fight corruption often fail, we know much less about why they sometimes succeed. The project **Islands of Integrity: Understanding the Politics of Corruption Reduction** draws interesting conclusions regarding 'positive outliers' in anti-corruption efforts: cases of successful corruption reduction. It suggests an innovative and sophisticated mixed methods approach to identifying and investigating 'positive outliers', taking into account the experiences of poor and marginalised people who are most affected by the effects of corruption.

Donors should work with rather than around governments to implement national plans based on locally defined priorities to overcome poverty and fragility.

The research has uncovered that in South Africa bribery has reduced in the police sector as the likely, if unintentional, consequence of policies targeting other problems. The introduction of a new technology to monitor police vehicles and a large-scale campaign in which the national government took over local governance in the province of Limpopo might both have contributed to the reduction of bribery. It thus seems that effective policies that monitor and disrupt public officials' behaviour – even if not explicitly focused on bribery – are effective in reducing corruption. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent these disruptive policies will have a longer-term impact, which lasts after the first shock effect has passed. Moreover, understanding why public officials ask for bribes in the first place is also important. Bribery might be a symptom of larger structural problems in sectors experiencing corruption, such as low wages and shortages of equipment. These more profound problems are not resolved by simply putting monitoring policies in place focused on frontline staff. A factor that complicates corruption research is that corruption reduction policies are often highly politicised, and anti-corruption advocates may be reluctant to admit success. They fear that success stories may be used as propaganda, or as a rationale for reducing political commitment to on-going corruption reduction efforts.[ii]

Policies that disrupt the behaviour of public officials can produce quick results in reducing bribery.

Resilience

Ineffective governance and weak state legitimacy can result in conflict or ineffective responses to disasters. In order to ensure that people affected by conflict and disasters are better capable of responding to harm, the meaning of the concept of resilience should be better understood and its benefits should be promoted. Resilience is central to sustainable development. SDG 1, for example, calls for ending poverty in all its forms everywhere, including through the building of the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations to reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters. Similarly, SDG 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, thus reducing the number of deaths and people affected by disasters.

The project **Equitable Resilience in Local Institutions (ERLI)** addresses these questions by examining the role played by local institutions in making people more resilient to poverty and natural disasters in the 'high-risk' context of Bangladesh, where climate change presents an enormous and on-going threat. ERLI understands resilience as the capacities of communities to prepare for, recover from, and adapt to both natural and man-made disasters. Through an innovative theoretical lens, combining the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the project aims to identify the underlying reasons for the inequitable distribution of resilience within and between communities. Participating communities in Bangladesh have indicated they feel least resilient to flooding and fluctuations in the market value of produce. Furthermore, resilience among marginalised communities depends on their caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status. For example, lower caste groups, who do not own land or assets and are therefore unable to obtain loans from government banks at a lower interest rate than NGO loans, report the lowest levels of resilience.

Promoting the right to information among poor communities is crucial to enabling them to access government services and to hold their government accountable.

It might be of interest to policymakers that the role of NGOs, in contrast to often-held assumptions, is not always positive. Many NGOs in Bangladesh are dedicated to microfinance. Although microfinance is meant to relieve immediate poverty, it often plays a role in catching beneficiaries in a circle of debt. Moreover, since many NGOs only target those beneficiaries who are likely to repay the credit, the poorest and most marginalised people are often excluded from NGO support. They also tend to be left out from government support, since as a result of widespread corruption in Bangladesh, the government's social safety net is mainly accessible to those people who have good relations with the governing parties. Combating this persistent corruption is therefore crucial. An important step is to provide citizens with information about government and other services. The right to information is important to building collective consciousness among people, enabling them to claim their rights and make better informed decisions about their future, for example by standing up against large-scale agro-industrial projects that promise development but in fact create environmental and economic systems that cause relative loss of livelihoods and displacement for some members within the communities.

In order to build resilience after disasters, humanitarian interventions after emergencies should contribute to long-term development plans.

The **Fragility Commission**, part of the project **Establishing State Legitimacy and Effectiveness in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Societies**, also addressed the issue of resilience. One of the key lessons learnt is the frequent tension between balancing short-term humanitarian aid and longer-term development programming. Whereas humanitarian aid generally has an immediate focus on responding to the most urgent needs after a natural or humanitarian disaster, it often fails to contribute to the longer-term capacity-building needed to enhance resilience to future shocks. Development aid, in contrast, often does not consider or respond to the unforeseen shocks and hazards that the poorest face. It generally fails to provide contingency funding to respond to urgent crises, which in their turn constitute obstacles to development. Policymakers should better integrate these two types of programming, by responding to urgent needs in relation to immediate and unforeseen disasters, while at the same time contributing to building longer-term resilience and the capacity to prevent those disasters. This means that humanitarian interventions after emergencies should contribute to long-term development plans, in line with national government priorities.[iii]

Security

An absence of state legitimacy and low levels of resilience lead to increased risks of insecurity. An often neglected area of fragility and insecurity is the maritime domain. Maritime crimes, such as piracy or illegal fishing, undermine sustainable development and are a core hindrance in reaching SDG 14, which urges states to conserve and use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. The project **Analysing Maritime Security: Capacity Building in the Western Indian Ocean (SafeSeas)** has identified how maritime security can be better organised and how the international community can provide more effective capacity building assistance. Maritime security, environmental protection, economic development and the human security of coastal populations are closely related. The economies of many coastal countries, especially island states, are dependent on the sea, for example through fisheries or sea-based tourism. The sea also offers new opportunities for economic development through what has become known as the 'blue economy' agenda. A lack of economic opportunities in coastal communities makes people more inclined to engage in maritime crimes such as piracy. Therefore, the strengthening of state institutions to govern the maritime domain efficiently and exploit it sustainably is crucial for sustainable development.[iv]

Reflexive practice, based on a careful, participatory analysis of the local environment and political context, is crucial for effective maritime capacity building. This requires using but also adapting international blueprints and best practices.

Drawing on the lessons from maritime security governance and capacity building in the Western Indian Ocean region, the **SafeSeas** project has developed a Best Practice Toolkit. This toolkit, together with other project results, demonstrates the inherent difficulties of devising effective maritime security structures. Maritime security is a complex field, involving various governmental agencies and non-state actors. It is by nature transnational, which means working across different state jurisdictions. Marine pollution, over-exploitation of marine resources, illegal fishery and piracy require collaboration and coordination across the economic, environmental and security policy spectrum. This calls for holistic and reflexive forms of governance and external assistance.

The **SafeSeas** project calls for a better connection between security policies and capacity building activities. Interventions need to respond to local contexts or concerns, and capacity building should be steered and coordinated by receiving countries first and foremost. The toolkit suggests that mastering the challenges and complexities of maritime security and capacity building requires reflexive practitioners, who challenge their own assumptions and rely on a careful, participatory analysis of the environment and the political context in which they operate. In maritime security, each actor and partner has its own particular culture, based on nationalities or organisations. As a result, understandings of and responses to problems can differ radically across contexts. Blueprints, universal standards and technologies can, therefore, only be effective if they are translated and adapted to locally-specific contexts. This adaptation can be strengthened through improved information-sharing and coordination among the agencies that implement capacity building activities. Transparency, institutional memory and strong review and accountability mechanisms are also crucial to making efforts more effective. Finally, the resulting capacity building strategies must not only provide a holistic view on the direction of travel, but also be specific in describing governance structures and the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved.[v]

Migration

Security is intricately related to migration, which is a major problem with 22.5 million refugees and 40.3 million internally displaced people worldwide by 2017 – including 31.1 million new internal displacements as a result of war and natural disasters in 2016 alone. On the one hand, insecurity on land and sea can cause migration, while on the other, migration can also affect the physical and economic security of those migrating and the countries receiving migrants. Migration is often one of the consequences of inadequate responses to natural and humanitarian crises or weak governance. Although recent years have known heated debates about the global 'migration crisis', the SDGs also recognise the positive contribution of migrants towards inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The project **Syrian Refugees in Jordan: the Challenge of Sustainable Development** examines the impact of migration on host communities in the light of SDG 8, related to the promotion of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. In particular, it looks into the effects of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market. Jordan is home to over 1.3 million Syrian refugees, an extremely high number given Jordan's modest population of 6.6 million. This influx of refugees can be expected to produce an impact on Jordan's labour market, whether for Jordanians or for the other 1.6 million immigrants in Jordan. Interestingly, the research has shown no significant changes in employment rates among Jordanians. Only a fifth of the Syrian refugees work. Those who do mainly work as irregular and informal wageworkers. This is partly related to the fact that many refugees are women and children. In addition, Syrian migrants on average have lower levels of education than Jordanians. They are thus active in a different type of employment than Jordanians and are simply not competing for the same type of jobs. Moreover, the refugees' arrival has also created demand for services and goods, and this might have compensated negative impacts for Jordanians' labour market prospects. As a result, most competition for labour can be found in the informal economy, and therefore affects immigrants from other countries, who have experienced changes such as fewer working hours and therefore lower total wages.

Allowing refugees to work legally does not necessarily impact negatively on host countries' economies, if sufficient resources and public services are in place to support refugees.

Since 2016, Jordan has allowed Syrians to obtain formal work permits for specific sectors such as agriculture, construction, food and textiles. This was the result of the 'Jordan Compact', in which in return for international grants and loans and preferential trade agreements with the European Union, Jordan committed to improving access to legal employment for its Syrian refugees. But the uptake of work permits by Syrian refugees has been very low so far. One potential reason is that Syrians seem reluctant to apply for work permits, for fear of losing UNHCR support. There is a need to better understand the reasons behind the low applications for work permits among Syrian refugees. Yet, research has shown the importance of providing international aid and support to stimulate the host economy and its labour market, thus enabling the provision of needed services for refugees as well as averting any potential negative consequences in the labour market and in access to public services for both natives and refugees. This means that allowing refugees to work legally does not necessarily impact negatively on host countries' economies when these conditions are in place.

Conclusion

The findings of the research projects in the *Sustainable Governance* thematic area of the British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* shed light on the diverse and interconnected social, economic and environmental aspects of governance. They provide important insights for policy-makers and practitioners working to improve governance:

- An interdisciplinary approach is crucial to understanding sustainable governance, which goes beyond addressing merely technical aspects of governance through laws, policies and institutions. These will prove ineffective if efforts are not based on a thorough understanding of the needs and experiences of people affected by these instruments.
- Instead of compartmentalising governance, humanitarian aid and development in separate arenas, a holistic understanding is needed of the connections between different areas of governance, including maritime and land-based security, corruption, responses to crises and development measures.
- Peace, stability and economic growth are put at risk by corruption, which therefore continues to be a policy area which needs urgent addressing. Strategies to monitor and disrupt public officials' behaviour seem to be most effective at reducing bribery.
- The right to information and support for local citizens to hold their governments to account are also important to improving governance.
- Although blueprints and international best practices are a well-regarded tool among policy-makers, they often fail to respond to local realities, needs and challenges. Sustainable solutions to improving governance should respond to local needs and involve local actors – state institutions, NGOs and local communities – building local capacity and resilience to cope with national and international humanitarian and environmental threats. Instead of imposing policies, donor agencies and international policy-makers should support national priorities and development plans defined by local actors.
- There is a need to go beyond ad hoc approaches to capacity-building or policymaking for sustainable governance. Context-specific approaches are needed, based on a long-term vision which not only responds to immediate conflict or disaster scenarios, but in the long run also prevents these from occurring. Analysing and understanding the interrelation between the social, economic and environmental aspects of governance is crucial for this. The projects described in this brief suggest different solutions and approaches to capacity-building:
    - Best practice toolkit for mapping maritime security capacity gaps and analysing maritime capacity building (http://www.safeseas.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Mastering-Maritime-Security-final.pdf)
    - Positive outlier approach to understanding and combating corruption (http://publications.dlprog.org/From%20Islands%20of%20Integrity%20to%20Understanding%20the%20Politics%20of%20Corruption%20Reduction.pdf)
    - Resilience ranking method for understanding the factors at play in increasing local resilience (https://equitableresilience.wordpress.com/research-methods/page/)

For more information about the 2016 Sustainable Development Programme, visit https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/sustainable-development-2016 or email gcrf@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

[i] Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development (2018), *Escaping the Fragility Trap*.
[ii] Peiffer, C. and Armitage, R. (2018), 'Searching for Success: A Mixed Methods Approach to Identifying Positive Outliers in Development Outcomes', DLP Research Paper 52; Peiffer, C and Armitage, R. (2017), 'Corruption Research: Hunting for Glimmers of Light in the Gloom'. Available on http://www.dlprog.org/opinions/corruption-research-hunting-for-glimmers-of-light-in-the-gloom.php.
[iii] Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development (2018), *Escaping the Fragility Trap*.
[iv] SafeSeas (2017), 'Maritime Security in Kenya: A Policy Area Under Development'. SafeSeas Concept Note 5; SafeSeas (2017), 'Maritime Security in Seychelles'. SafeSeas Concept Note 4; SafeSeas (2017): 'Capturing Capacity Building: A Framework'. SafeSeas Concept Note 6.
[v] SafeSeas (2018), 'Mastering Maritime Security: Reflexive Capacity Building and the Western Indian Ocean Experience'. A Best Practice Toolkit.