WHY INSTITUTIONS OF SECURITY CAN FAIL TO PROVIDE EXPERIENCES OF SECURITY

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Institutions of security – the military, police and judiciary – are critical for peaceful governance in states throughout the world. It is for this reason that so much funding and manpower is committed to Security Sector Reform (SSR) in post-conflict peacebuilding: the rewriting of constitutions and laws, the establishment of courts and prison systems, the restructuring of militaries and the retraining and redeployment of police. Such processes function to re-establish the *institutions* of security. However, do such processes result in *experiences* of security? Should it be taken as given that a restructured military and a retrained police force make people feel more secure?

Worryingly, in many cases of post-conflict recovery in Africa today, newly established institutions do not seem to provide experiences of security. Instead they are often experienced as largely ineffectual, or in some cases even provoke experiences of enhanced insecurity. There are a number of reasons for this, some clearly understood and others not. It is sadly true, for example, that in unequal societies legal and police protections are unequally distributed. In many post-conflict African societies, such services can become virtually privatized by those with resources and power and so fail to provide equal protections for all. Such dynamics are only enhanced in post-conflict situations where ongoing security concerns serve to legitimate the use of private security firms and the deployment of military and police forces for corporate interests, such as those of multinational corporations.

However, there are also more obscure reasons for the failure of institutions to provide experiences of justice. This essay is particularly concerned with the disjunction between the concepts that drive the design of institutions by those with the wealth, power and influence to fund and implement them, and the concepts among the diverse populations who are

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Villagers in Moyamba (Sierra Leone) walk by a United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)
Photo cred: UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein

intended to experience them. Specifically, I am talking here of institutions designed, funded and administered by Western-led international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank or the EU, by national development agencies such as the US's AID, the UK's DfID or Italy's IDC, or human rights organizations and religious organizations with an interest in post-conflict peace, such as Caritas Internationalis.

These international organizations play the dominant role in security sector reform in post-conflict societies. Importantly, however, the policies and practices of such organizations are, with few exceptions, governed and driven by ideas and concepts inherent to a specific tradition of or approach to security, and these concepts, in turn, give shape and form to the institutions proposed to solve security dilemmas in post-conflict societies. In short, concepts of security guide, govern and limit the design of the institutions of security. There is nothing surprising about this, as all practice is driven by theory. However, when such practice is implemented in societies potentially quite dissimilar to those from which the designers originated, the disjunction between the ideas and concepts in the first society and those in the second can mean that the institutions are experienced unexpectedly and even negatively.

Institutions, in this sense, can be seen as the *embodiment of concepts* and ideas dominant in the societies that produced them. Institutions of security therefore, are embodiments of concepts such as authority, legitimacy, justice and safety. The norms and rules underpinning judicial systems, courts, police forces and militaries reflect the specificity of those concepts in Western society and, therefore, also *govern expectations* of how those institutions will function. As long as the concepts embodied by institutions are consistent with the concepts that govern expectations, then institutions will have predictable effects and will provide suitable experiences of security, as in Figure 1.

However, problems emerge when institutions of security are implemented in societies with alternative conceptions of authority, legitimacy, justice and safety; this is where we see the disjunction – as in Figure 2.

And many African societies provide clear illustrations of such alternatives. In the prominence of plural legal systems, for example, we see evidence of the diverse conceptions of justice within many African societies. Similar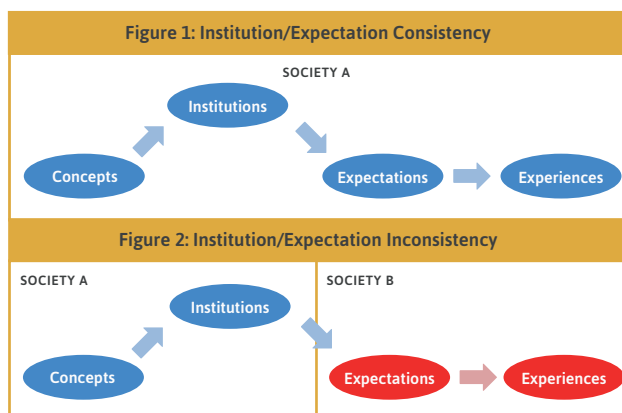ly, in the widespread importance of patrimonial systems of power related to autochthony and descent from a founding patriarch, we see evidence of alternative conceptions of authority and legitimacy. Perhaps more striking, in the huge diversity but widespread reliance in rural Africa on diviners, medicine men and other forms of spiritual healing and protection from malign invisible forces, we see beliefs about threats and therefore conceptions of safety that are wholly inconsistent with those prominent in the West and foundational to the usual institutions of security.

Such alternative *conceptions inspire expectations* that the institutions of security are ill-equipped to meet even if they are not unequally accessible and subject to co-optation. Plural legal systems have developed in Africa specifically because Western-designed legal systems have failed to bridge the gap between the concepts of their origins and those of their implementation. They can function in parallel with, but fail to integrate, locally grounded approaches to justice. Similarly, even perfectly functioning and non-corrupted militaries and police forces have no means to protect individuals, families and communities from occult forces or malign spirits, often seen in Africa as prime movers of criminal activity, hostile interactions or violent conflict.

Foundational concepts about the social world give rise to institutions for managing that world. Those concepts form our expectations of how those institutions will operate and what they will provide for us. And when institutions emerge from the society in which they are then implemented, there is a natural *consistency* between the institution and the expectations. However, when institutions are transported across borders and between cultures – even if it is done with the best of intentions – disjunction is caused between expectations and institutions. This disjunction can result in unexpected and potentially negative experiences. Prominent institutions of security are as open to such problems as any other institutions. It is necessary, therefore, to think carefully about the intentions behind interventions, and to consider more deeply the potential inconsistencies between institutions and expectations.

Figure 1: Institution/Expectation Consistency

SOCIETY A

Concepts → Institutions → Expectations → Experiences

Figure 2: Institution/Expectation Inconsistency

SOCIETY A

SOCIETY B

Concepts → Institutions → Expectations → Experiences

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