

Foreign Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-Affected contexts

On 20 January 2014, the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law and the Broker took up the findings of the recent evaluation of the Dutch Foreign Policy in Fragile States 2005 – 2011 (IOB) to launch an international debate on Foreign Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-Affected contexts. The online discussions were sparked by key questions identified during an earlier Knowledge Platform consultation event on the IOB report, which focused on theories of change and context analysis.

‘It is about getting the politics right’

In the ensuing weeks, a **top-level international debate** emerged with more than 30 active, international participants from South Africa, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Kenya, Norway, Canada, The Netherlands, and the United States. Since the launch of the debate the online community of the Platform more than doubled with currently more than 170 active members involved. The debate attracted more than **3000 visits** of which 50% were new visitors to the [website](#). Insightful contributions and ideas came from different professional

fields, ranging from policy makers and practitioners to researchers. The debate provided ample opportunity for professionals to directly engage with leading experts such as [Erik Solheim](#) (OECD-DAC), [Joel Hellman](#), (The World Bank), [Jordan Ryan](#) (UNDP), and [Professor Michael Pugh](#) (University of Bradford; CICAM).

Several lines of consensus took shape. Many participants were in favor of a **multi-stakeholder approach**, actively involving **local actors** on a political as well as technical level.

Similar consensus was built around the value of pursuing a comprehensive approach, and some advocated for the sequencing of priorities within a coordinated strategic framework. Equally important would then be to address the issue of **context specificity**, and start exploring ways to keep activities and programs in step with the situation on the ground.

In addition, the concept of the **social contract** drew a good deal of

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¹ [Click here](#) for overview of 5 key questions

attention, specifically concerning how various approaches may contribute (or undermine) its consolidation.

'Development is about people'

The issue of active **local government and self-organization** was also frequently noted. But immediately the question arose: Who is 'the local community'? And who is represented by whom? Whilst aiming to work with a bottom-up approach, one is simultaneously challenged to account for **international and geopolitical realities**. Therefore, many spoke to a need to accommodate different power dynamics and roles of different actors by fostering robust and sustained **political dialogue**.

Similarly, a number of lines of tensions could be identified. For example, on the one hand, statebuilding theories and historical models help donors and policy makers to set about on a course of assistance, ostensibly toward stability. On the other hand, these models must be applied in local and context-specific environments.

There is emerging doubt as to whether current "Western" models are relevant guides in modern fragile contexts, or if these models have 'failed states'. Should we find alternatives? If so, where and how?

Whereas some emphasized the need to explore **transnational approaches**, others advocated for an understanding of stability from a

point of **self-organization** and complexity theory.

In the process of involving a wider range of actors, there were various views as to how best to make political processes genuinely **inclusive**. The suggestions varied, some encouraging a perspective of agents of change, others arguing communities of change were more reliable.

Many touched on difficult issues, such as, what signals 'local legitimacy', and tensions between national and local models of governance. What is the best way to go about this? Or perhaps more to the point: Is there a 'best way' to go about this?

No 'one-size-fits-all' approach; but we can identify some assumptions

The main strands of the online debate fed back into the Platform's endeavors to explore the possible consequences of the recent evaluation of the Dutch Foreign Policy in Fragile States. Whereas the online debate was a first step to explore the theoretical assumptions underlying our work in fragile and conflict-affected settings, the Second Annual Conference of the Platform provided space to venture further and discuss the practical implications of these explorations.

For more information on future endeavors of the Platform, both online and offline, please keep an eye on our [website](#).