Universität Basel

Research Project

Negotiating Statehood in Post-Conflict Africa. Dynamics of state (re)construction in societies after civil war

Project funded by own resources

Project title Negotiating Statehood in Post-Conflict Africa. Dynamics of state (re)construction in societies after civil war

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Organisation / Research unit
Departement Gesellschaftswissenschaften / Politikwissenschaft (Goetschel)
swisspeace foundation
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Status Completed

Academic and policy research about Africa has been largely dominated in recent years by discourses about the purported "failure" of the State. Incapable of providing basic services to its citizen, challenged in its monopoly over violence and security, contested by various social actors and groups, at times violently through armed rebellion, the State in Africa has come to be seen as an "empty shell", or as void of any tangible "reality". Yet, despite this crisis, States continue to exist, and the State failure discourse has been rightly criticised for offering a normative perspective which tends to take the Western State model as a yardstick and use it in order to "measure" statehood in other contexts, and for thereby analysing states for what they are not instead of trying to grasp how they actually work on the ground.

This project aims therefore to study and analyse the concrete day-to-day practices of states and to understand how new forms of statehood emerge as the result of negotiation processes between various local, national and international actors. The focus will be on post-violent conflicts settings in Africa, because civil wars are moments of intense social and political change, and processes of State (re)construction in post-conflict phases allows to see states "at work" at a crucial moment in their history. It will also take secondary cities (such as district or provincial capitals) as a unit of analysis, thus bridging an important gap in the literature and providing empirically-based knowledge on how power flows between the central state power and its periphery through these administrative centres.

With case studies on Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan and Angola, the project will build on the research module on 'Negotiating statehood' developed at IP swisspeace during phase 2 of the NCCR N-S. It will bring this conceptual one step further by focusing on how states (re-)deploy themselves after conflict. By taking secondary cities as unit of analysis, it will also bridge a gap in the literature on the topic. It will thus contribute to current debates about statehood in Africa and beyond at both an academic and policy levels.

Keywords Africa, conflict, statehood

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