
Public Service Reform in Post-Conflict Societies

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Building a capable public service is a key component of post-conflict state building. An effective public service is fundamental to the regulation of society, to managing public funds, and to service delivery. Yet in post-conflict environments, there is typically a tradeoff between the long-term objective of state building and securing the peace in the short term. To buy peace, political elites hand out public jobs and resources to constituents regardless of merit. Donors frequently rely on “parallel” project delivery structures rather than public servants to address citizens’ pressing service delivery needs. Both of these practices may achieve short-term objectives but undermine state building. In the face of these trade-offs, how can capable public services be built in post-conflict societies? This paper aims to summarize the evidence base regarding this question. It does so by reviewing the evidence from post-conflict settings, and by discussing the validity of findings on public service reform from non-conflict settings. Given the distinctive tradeoffs invoked by securing the peace, and limited prior research on post-conflict settings, this topic presents a wide-open research agenda.

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Public service reform serves to improve the management of human resources within the public service, which in turn ensures the running of a functioning state. The public service is here understood to comprise civilian government employees at the central and subnational levels, excluding the armed forces. Public service reform is part of building government effectiveness by enhancing the capacity of state institutions, with anticipated positive effects on governance and service delivery.

Creating a competent and accountable body of public servants is a challenge in any context. It is, however, particularly difficult in countries that are emerging from

conflict. There, service delivery needs are acute, but the levels of institutional capacity and professional competence are notably low. Post-conflict, public services are typically depleted of capable staff both because of pre-conflict legacies of extractive regimes, and because public servants died in the war or fled to the diaspora. In separation wars, such as in South Sudan or Timor-Leste, state structures may need to be built from scratch.

Political elites may lack incentives to bridge this capacity gap by investing in public servants' capacity. To stabilize fragile coalitions, they may prefer to hand out public jobs to constituents or former combatants (as private goods), rather than recruiting the most capable (to serve the public good). Peace agreements often set specific expectations about the number and affiliation of these public service posts, handing out public jobs with little regard to merit or a fiscally sustainable wage bill. As a result, the public service that gets formed post-conflict is often weak and remains rooted in an institutional legacy of conflict.

Faced by important tradeoffs between short- and long-term objectives, how should public administrations be rebuilt in post-conflict societies? This paper reviews the evidence base regarding this question and outlines the research agenda ahead.

There exists limited research on public service reforms in post-conflict settings. We therefore discuss related literatures on (a) the political economy of public service reform; (b) a "macro" public administration literature on public service reform trajectories in developed and developing countries; and, (c) an emerging experimental "micro" literature on the public service, mostly focused on developing countries. A central task of this paper is to assess the extent to which these literatures extrapolate to post-conflict settings. We draw on a qualitative analysis of public service reform trajectories in five post-conflict countries undertaken by one of the authors of this piece (Blum, Ferreiro-Rodriguez and Srivastava, 2019) to provide context to our discussion.

We argue that post-conflict countries face a relatively unique set of constraints on their development. Centrally, the state's inability to monopolize violence incentivizes politicians to use the state for patronage and rent-seeking. Conversely, it limits the development outcomes the state can deliver. These incentives are compounded by capacity constraints, notably low levels of institutional and personnel capacity, and a fragmented service identity. Although these constraints differ in intensity across settings, their commonality legitimizes the joint analysis of post-conflict countries. While evidence from non-conflict settings does yield lessons for countries recovering from conflict, we conclude that given these unique constraints, there is a wide-open research agenda on the public service in post-conflict states.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We briefly summarize the political economy literatures' main theoretical insights regarding the development of the public service in post-conflict settings. We then assess the empirical evidence on public service reform in post-conflict societies and contextualize it with reference

to this theory. We group interventions along four broad themes: (a) controlling the size and structure of the public workforce; (b) selecting and paying public servants; (c) building a coherent public service identity; and, (d) building public servants' capacity. We conclude by summarizing the substantive research agenda and by drawing implications for the research methods suited to address it.

Political Economy Theories and Public Service Reform

Theories of political economy frequently place intra-elite bargaining center stage to explain policy outcomes (Bates 2001; Siverson et al. 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; and North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009). In the field of public service reform, it is useful to focus on two sets of elite players who compete for discretion over public jobs, salaries, and resources: that is, centralized and decentralized players. Central players comprise the chief executive (typically the President) and central agencies reporting to him, such as the Ministry of Finance (MoF) or the central human resources body. Such agencies are typically controlled by “winning” parties in the conflict. Decentralized players comprise line-ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), whose loyalty to the center may vary.

This distinction between central and decentralized actors focuses our attention on the disputed nature of public service. Both sets of players benefit from discretion over public jobs as a source of rents and as a means of rewarding the constituents that keep them in power with public jobs or services. Centralized players' choices comprise setting and enforcing formal public service rules and budgets. Decentralized players can choose to comply with or to evade centrally set rules.

The bargaining game between rival elites at these different levels defines the stage on which public sector reform plays out (United Nations 2012). Governing coalitions are fragile, often comprising previously conflicting parties. When decentralized players can use the threat of resuming violence, centralized players may struggle to strong-arm them into taking up public service reforms. Decentralized elites have particularly strong bargaining power for exercising discretion over public jobs and for evading centrally-set rules. Geddes (1994) and Horn (1995) explore why political elites are unlikely to be willing to give up the power of patronage and tie their own hands through meritocratic institutions.

Instability and competition for survival in power shortens political elites' time horizons. This provides an adverse setting for public service reforms, which tend to improve services—and hence yield political payoffs—only in the long run (Schneider and Heredia 2003). Consequently, post-conflict political elites will prefer distributing public jobs (as a private good) in return for political support (Robinson and Verdier 2013) over adopting public service reforms aimed at public good provision.

Even if centralized and decentralized incentives align, capacity constraints to implement reform can be extreme (UNDP 2010). This is true at the center, where

staff may lack the capacity for driving the reform, as well as amongst decentralized actors, where staff may lack the capacity to implement the reform (UNDESA 2007). Similarly, the central state often lacks reliable information necessary for reform such as on how many people it employs, how they are paid, and how they are recruited at the periphery (United Nations and World Bank 2017).

The presence of so-called parallel structures could be seen to further reduce the incentive for state-led public service reform. In order to meet urgent needs for reconstruction and service delivery, donors often prefer to bypass rather than build the capacity of the state by creating donor-initiated parallel structures or by relying on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These parallel structures reduce the pressure on government to deliver services itself and disperse the legitimacy gains from doing so, as citizens might credit donors, not government, with (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).

Donors can play a critical role in shaping public service reform trajectories by exerting pressure on government decision makers to adopt public good-oriented public service reform (meritocracy, downsizing etc.). This can improve the chances for reform (United Nations 2010), but it can also have negative consequences. By pushing for a service delivery or reform agenda larger than that proposed by intra-elite bargaining, donors can increase short-term incentives to deviate from a sustainable bargain and increase the likelihood of a return to conflict (Berry and Igboemeka 2005; del Castillo 2008; von Billerbeck 2011; Philippe Le Billon 2011). These donor-induced reforms may also be adopted in name as a signal to donors, rather than as a real change in government processes (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews 2013).

Empirical Evidence

We now use this lens of a bargaining game between centralized and decentralized elites to review the empirical evidence on public service reform in post-conflict societies. Broadly, there is little rigorous evidence on public service reform specifically from post-conflict contexts. A recent qualitative study of post-conflict public service reform trajectories in Afghanistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Timor-Leste (Blum, Ferreiro-Rodriguez, and Srivastava 2019), provides more detailed comparative analysis than has been available to date. Other related comparative analyses provide complementary insights (Barma, Huybens, and Viñuela 2014; Di John, Carl, and Spencer 2017) and together these provide context to the evidence-base reviewed here.

There exists a parallel literature on public service reforms in non-post-conflict settings. This mostly qualitative macro body of research on public service reform trajectories is significant for OECD countries (such as Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011 and Pollitt 2013). Grindle (2012)'s comparative analysis of long-term reform trajectories

in today's Latin American countries is one of a few studies in this literature that explicitly focuses on non-OECD countries (others include [Geddes 1994](#); [Schneider and Heredia 2003](#); [Velarde et al. 2014](#)). Rigorous micro-evidence on the impacts of specific public service reform interventions in non-conflict settings is nascent but growing ([Finan, Olken and Pande 2015](#)).

Some of the reform patterns described in this literature carry over to post-conflict settings. For example, [Grindle \(2012\)](#) finds that in both Latin America and historically in OECD countries, it took decades for meritocratic institutions to take roots. During that process they were intensely contested, constructed, evaded, destroyed, and reconstructed; a pattern ([Blum et al. 2019](#)) echo for post-conflict settings. In none of this work, however, does the central reformer face an existential threat to the state, such as the threat of decentralized actors resuming violence towards the centralized state. The first-order constraint on the design of public administrations in post-conflict settings is therefore not considered. Recent OECD reform experiences are also argued to have limited applicability in settings where Weberian norms have not or have only weakly taken root in wider society ([Schick 1998](#)). These factors highlight the importance of developing a complementary literature on public administration dynamics in post-conflict states.

We break our review into four key questions facing reformers in the post-conflict public service setting. The first issue is to determine the aggregate size and structure of the public workforce. Mechanisms and interventions for controlling the size and structure of the public service are a major policy tool of centralized players (ministries' of public service and finance). Second, we jointly discuss the selection and pay (financial incentives) of public servants. Third, we focus on interventions aimed at integrating the public service into a coherent workforce, recognizing that conflict often polarizes identities within the public service. Finally, we focus on capacity building interventions aimed at the core public service and parallel structures built to complement it. To emphasize the practical importance of these topics, we provide a list of common interventions in public administration reform policy in [table 1](#), highlighting how closely they align to our topics of study.

What Determines the Size and Structure of the Public Service?

Managing the aggregate size and structure of the public service serves to ensure that it does not grow unsustainably large, and that its composition is aligned with service delivery needs. After conflict, public services frequently grow rapidly and with little control by centralized players ([Blum et al. 2019](#)). Driven largely by the hiring of unskilled employees, this growth has often failed to address the central capacity problem that post-conflict administrations face: filling the "missing middle" of qualified professional staff. Not least, this growth has sometimes driven the proportion of government resources spent on wages beyond what post-conflict countries can

Table 1. Building Public Administration in Post-Conflict States

Public Service Policy	Examples of Interventions	Country Cases
<i>What determines the size and structure of the public service?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishment and payroll controls - Payroll audits - Reforming pension systems - Salary financing (by donors) 	<p>A successful payroll audit in Sierra Leone removed 16 percent of disqualified civil servants from the payroll</p> <p>Afghanistan's Verified Payroll Program automated wage payments and secured centralized control over the structure of public employment</p>
<i>Who should be selected and what should they be paid?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pay and grading reforms - Ad hoc pay increases - Contract designs for technical assistance 	<p>South Sudan absorbed tens of thousands of ex-combatants into the public service to secure peace</p> <p>Liberia's Young Professional Program injected meritocratically selected young professionals into the public service</p>
<i>How can conflicting public service identities be managed?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Service for the Nation" campaigns - Managing intergenerational divides 	<p>Liberia's interim administration carved up different ministries between warring factions as part of the peace process</p> <p>Ethiopia's Change Army was perceived by public officials as forging a common identity for service delivery</p>
<i>How can public servants capacity be built?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training - Capacity injection schemes - Independent service delivery agencies 	<p>Afghanistan's Treasury Department reduced dependence on technical assistance by being led by a civil servant and significant investments in training</p> <p>Afghanistan's model of contracting out primary health service delivery to NGOs led to a dramatic improvement in health outcomes.</p>

sustainably afford. A decade after the end of conflict, outlays on wages in four out of the five post-conflict countries studied by (Blum et al. 2019) equaled or exceeded 50 percent of total government expenditures.

A major reason for rapid public service growth in some post-conflict countries is that central players have been unable to control it. In any government, centralized and decentralized players have conflicting objectives with regard to the size and structure of the public service. Centralized players are concerned with keeping the aggregate expenditure on wages within sustainable ceilings. Decentralized agencies, on the other hand, aim to maximize the number of staff they control, as well as their compensation. This tension is meant to be resolved through formal negotiations in the budget process. Centralized agencies should then be able to enforce agreed ceilings on how much public service organisations spend on wages (called the wage bill) or on the number of posts available to them for recruitment (called the establishment). In post-conflict countries, however, centralized players have de facto lacked

both the political bargaining power and the administrative systems for exerting such controls effectively.

One symptom of the weak bargaining power of centralized elites is the absorption of ex-combatants into the public service or armed forces. Disarming and employing ex-combatants is at the heart of the post-conflict challenge. Some countries, such as Liberia, have successfully implemented Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs (Jaye 2009). Others, such as South Sudan, however, had to absorb tens of thousands of ex-combatants into the public service or armed forces. Blum et al. 2019) find that DDR programs for ex-combatants have only been an option when the threat of resuming violence was relatively small. Where threats were still substantial, the benefits to decentralized actors from sustaining their threat of violence were greater than those from DDR. In these latter cases, governments have sought to prevent militia members from resuming arms by providing them with public sector jobs.

While it may help secure the peace, providing ex-combatants with public service jobs has come with a series of costs. It has locked governments such as South Sudan into long-term salary liabilities that may not yield corresponding service delivery-related outputs. Similarly, the hiring of candidates based on their combatant status rather than their ability to govern has necessarily slowed public service renewal. As “generals” become “secretary generals”, their managerial skills are often completely lacking.

Further, the effectiveness of central controls is frequently undermined by the rapid growth of employees paid outside the formal payroll. Such employment outside the payroll leaves centralized players with little control over employment. Central agencies typically do not know the number of total public service staff, who they are, or what their qualifications are. The evidence suggests that the numbers of temporary staff often grow as an evasive response of decentralized players to central controls over the payroll. In Timor-Leste, for instance, a tight establishment ceiling provoked line-MDAs to excessively rely on temporary staff. Centralized agencies did not have the power to block these hires. In Liberia, line-MDAs recruited temporary staff from general allowance “slush” funds in order to avoid the Civil Service Agency’s recruitment processes. The hiring of temporary employees has served both patronage and service delivery purposes. As a Liberian official notes: “The institutions have to function and we cannot wait indefinitely for the [Civil Service Agency] to exhaust its bureaucracies.”

Moreover, centralized players’ ability to control the size and structure of the public service has been undermined by weak control and information systems. In the immediate aftermath of conflict, controls to regulate spending are typically defunct. As (Wilson 2015) notes for Afghanistan, conflict has led to the destruction of government records and personnel files, or has rendered them outdated. This led

to great uncertainty about the size and structure of Afghanistan's public service (Evans et al. 2004).

One way to improve central information on employment is for the center to undertake an audit of the government's entire payroll. Such audits undertake physical inspections of records and personnel to create a frequently biometrically validated consensus payroll. Payroll audits have had only mixed success as a means of regaining central control. In Sierra Leone, for example, a successful payroll audit conducted in 2008 was critical to restoring lost employment records for civil servants. In other cases, including Liberia (Freedman 2011) and South Sudan, audit findings were only partially implemented or undermined by the revolving door syndrome in which laid-off public servants were re-recruited. Most fundamentally, post-conflict administrations typically lack the information management capacity required for running traditional control systems that build on these audits. Audits therefore quickly become outdated.

These findings suggest four promising directions for research on post-conflict state's basic capability to control the number and structure of its employees. First, can reducing the degree of central control over establishment and payroll actually be beneficial? The evidence suggest that overly tight central controls over the establishment come with major costs—the risk of provoking evasion, major bureaucratic transaction costs such as delays for formalizing recruits, and not least rent-seeking by centralized players. It is therefore not clear a priori that relaxing central controls—for example, permitting local clinics to hire their own staff within centrally set ceilings or wage envelopes—will necessarily entail worse outcomes in terms of the quality, motivation, and timeliness of staff recruited.

Second, how can the long-run costs of providing public jobs to ex-combatants be contained? If public employment is the only viable option in the short run, it becomes important to pave the way for a longer-term transition. For example, an (empirically unprecedented) option could be to employ ex-combatants under contractor regimes rather than full civil service statutes, in view of later on facilitating their reintegration into the private sector and avoiding locking governments into long-term fiscal liabilities.

Third, post-conflict countries' failure to run standard control systems effectively raises the question of how less information-intensive control systems can be designed that are manageable in low capacity contexts. One successful example of such a simplified system is Afghanistan's so-called Verified Payroll Program (VPP), first piloted in December 2004 in 13 ministries in Kabul. The VPP's purpose was to restore basic control over who got paid in Kabul, in a situation where salaries were distributed in cash. The VPP essentially required each employee to appear in person before a representative of the Ministry of Finance, of the disbursing Bank, and of the respective line-department to collect his or her monthly salary. These three supervisors would verify the recipient's identity (against the payroll). Since 2004, the VPP has rapidly

grown in coverage and has become increasingly automated. This ex-ante control mechanism reduced information intensity by merely focusing on employee identity (Blumenstock et al. 2015).

Fourth, there is scope to better understand interventions by which centralized control agencies might expand their discretion and control at low cost. Beyond requiring less information, the Afghanistan VPP program leveraged technology to better monitor the payroll. In what other ways can technology expand the capacity of centralized agencies to monitor the public service? There are likely to be avenues for research in both high-tech and very low-tech means of extended control.

Who Should Be Selected and What Should They Be Paid?

Hiring capable public servants is central to building a capable state in any context. It is particularly important after conflict, when public services are typically depleted of skills and suffer from the so-called “missing middle” of professional staff. In some cases, such as after Timor-Leste’s secession from Indonesia, public services needed to be rebuilt from scratch. In other cases, such as Afghanistan, career-systems had to be opened to lateral entry in order to inject fresh skills into senior positions, thus exacerbating patronage risks.

In such a context, the contest between the center and decentralized agencies revolves around control over the identity and political connections of who gets hired. Political interference in selection decisions in the form of patronage is the major threat to selecting capable public servants. Patronage decisions may be influenced by ethnic or regional characteristics, or whether the candidates were on the right “side” in the conflict (see findings for Brazil in Colonnelli et al. 2020).

Where the center has concerns about the ability of the state to deliver, it may aim to constrain recruitment to qualified candidates. Historically, the main institutional answer to this issue has been the establishment of independent Public Service Commissions (PSCs). PSCs are centralized agencies charged with overseeing the meritocratic selection of public servants. These commissions limit the discretion of decentralized agencies in making selection decisions and hence have been a key instrument for wresting public jobs from politicization. International experience shows, however, that patronage systems have only slowly yielded to reformers. Grindle (2012) documents the gradual and partial implementation of meritocratic reforms in OECD and Latin American countries over decades, shaped by intra-elite contestation. Geddes (1994) explores why political elites in Latin America were unlikely to be willing to give up the power of patronage and tie their own hands through meritocratic institutions. Robinson and Verdier (2013) argue theoretically that in many contexts, it is rational for political elites to use public jobs as a means of redistributing rents, in order to solve the commitment problem between politicians and voters.

Hence, unsurprisingly, evidence on the prevalence of patronage in developing countries abounds. [Callen et al. \(2018\)](#), for example, provide evidence on the political nature of recruitment and its detrimental effects on productivity in Pakistan. These authors find that public officials in constituencies with high levels of patronage are selected along non-meritocratic lines and are notably absent in their workplace. [Pierskalla and Sacks \(2020\)](#) show that the recruitment of contractual teachers in Indonesian subnational governments spikes prior to local elections.

Historically, the key to adopting meritocratic systems was arguably that patronage had become a politically salient issue that mobilized voters. In response to such pressures, politicians may have incentives to adopt meritocratic institutions in order to offer their constituents “a durable solution to the problem of corruption inherent in patronage” ([Horn 1995](#)). For example, the United States’ 1833 Pendleton Act—which established merit as the basis for government appointments—was backed by a middle-class coalition that had grown frustrated with widespread patronage, and politicians responded to these electoral pressures.

By contrast, in post-conflict societies, centralized elites typically lack the electoral incentives for enforcing meritocratic institutions. Rather, to survive in power, post-conflict political elites face an overwhelming rationale for the clientelistic use of public jobs to prevent the reemergence of violence, by far outweighing the political forces in favor of meritocracy. In post-conflict states, public jobs provide a powerful tool of clientelism, because the public sector frequently provides a substantial share of formal employment ([World Bank 2019b](#)). It is thus perhaps unsurprising that PSCs have mostly been ineffective in post-conflict settings, despite strong donor support ([Blum et al. 2019](#)). The checks and balances of PSCs have mostly been evaded by decentralized agencies in post-conflict settings, to a much larger extent than in non-conflict contexts ([Grindle 2012](#)). This has undermined PSCs’ credibility.

Moreover, attempting to ensure a minimum level of merit in selection by tightly regulating the selection processes can backfire. For example, donor-influenced schemes in Afghanistan to inject fresh skill into senior positions yielded candidates that were not “owned and accepted” by the respective line-agency and who could therefore yield little influence. The optimal approach to selecting recruits may therefore be dynamic, only gradually moving towards greater central control and independence from political interference and patronage.

Besides selection, offering public service pay that is suited to attract, retain, and motivate skilled public servants is critical to building a capable state ([Akerlof 1982](#); [Fehr and Gächter 2000](#)). International evidence is as of yet inconclusive as to the effect of pay on the type of applicants that self-select into the public service ([Banuri, Keefer, and Kearney 2013](#); [Hanna and Wang 2013](#); [Cowley and Smith 2014](#); [Banerjee, Baul, and Rosenblat 2015](#); [Banuri and Keefer 2016](#); [Deserranno 2019](#)).

There is mixed empirical evidence on the incentive impacts of unconditionally higher public sector wages (Francois 2000; Delfgaauw and Dur 2007; Prendergast 2007). Van Rijckeghem and Weder (2001) provide cross-national evidence that countries with higher public service wages have lower levels of corruption. Dal Bó, Finan, and Rossi (2013) and Ashraf, Bandiera, and Jack (2014) find evidence that suggests that higher pay or better career prospects attracts more capable, but no less pro-socially motivated applicants. By contrast, Deserranno (2019) and Banuri and Keefer (2016) find that higher pay offers can lead to a less pro-socially motivated applicant pool. Perhaps closer to our context, Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang (2015) provide evidence that higher wages for Kenyan police officers increases efforts to collect bribes and the value of those bribes. Where corruption is embedded in a “hierarchy of extraction”, a frequent characteristic of bureaucracies in weak states, higher wages have an ambiguous effect on bribe taking. As Finan et al. (2015) argue, such inconclusive findings are hardly surprising, as they depend on features of the wider labor market.

Post-conflict settings pose a number of unique pay setting challenges. With populations often depleted of skills post-conflict, governments look to the diaspora. Yet, as governments try to appeal to qualified diaspora nationals with high reservation wages to return, offering sufficient pay becomes challenging. Further, a rapid aid influx typically intensifies competition with development partners and nongovernmental organizations for a thin domestic skill base. Governments must therefore design pay policy that takes into account the features of multiple distinct labor markets.

These pressures have led post-conflict countries to adopt increasingly differentiated and discretionary pay structures, departing from the archetypical single, centrally controlled pay scale. To rebuild Afghanistan’s public service, for example, the World Bank supported an asymmetric pay reform that offered selected public servants multiple times higher pay than what most public servants in similar positions received. In a context where central players lacked the authority over decentralized MDAs to push through any more-systematic reform, the idea was to focus on restructuring and improving pay in selected priority units that demonstrated willingness to reform (Hakimi et al. 2004). Emerging economies have used similar pay differentiation strategies successfully to build “islands of capability” within their public services. Evidence from Brazil, Chile, and Indonesia reveals that “the higher paid agencies or groups of staff were better able to attract and retain high-quality staff”.

However, post-conflict governments have also used pay differentiation for clientelism. Central actors may target a small number of well-paying and influential jobs to a relatively small inner circle of politically connected elites on “high-pay islands” within the administration. Such jobs can, for example, be a means of rewarding loyalists for campaign contributions. Iyer and Mani (2012) is a pioneering study of how politicians shifted bureaucrats across pay grade levels and service organizations that were seen to be loyal to them.

In Liberia, for example, the proliferation of allowances at the discretion of line-ministries has been a major source of patronage power and has led to large pay differentiation among public servants with similar jobs. In Sierra Leone, by contrast, such pay elites remained relatively separate from the public service, located mostly in semiautonomous agencies with distinct pay scales, such as the roads or revenue authority. These different outcomes likely reflect the distribution of bargaining power between centralized and decentralized elites. As (Blum et al. 2019) note, in Sierra Leone, a strong presidency with a relatively homogenous governing coalition may have made it politically feasible to concentrate lucrative posts for rewarding loyalists in a few agencies. By contrast, in Liberia, the president had weaker control over a more fragmented cabinet, possibly having to delegate discretion over high-pay appointments to each minister as part of the political bargain.

If pay differentiation has been an important pattern post-conflict, what about using pay for performance (PRP) to motivate public officials? While there is no direct evidence on the impact of PRP from post-conflict settings, the evidence on performance pay in the public administration is generally that it has failed to work. Perry et al. (2009) review 57 studies on pay for performance in the public sector and conclude “pay-for-performance continues to be adopted but persistently fails to deliver”. Hasnain et al. (2014) argue that, “although some studies have shown that [pay-for-performance] can work in even the most dysfunctional bureaucracies in developing countries, there are few cases illustrating its effectiveness or otherwise outside OECD settings”. In a “replication study”, Rasul, Rogger, and Williams (2019) assess the use of performance indicators in the public administration and find negative impacts of similar magnitudes in both Nigeria and Ghana. Bandiera et al. (2020) provide experimental evidence within procurement agencies in Pakistan that supports these findings. Both Imran and Rogger (2018) and Hasnain et al. (2014) point to evidence that across a range of settings, performance pay has the most deleterious effects in more complex public sector tasks such as the management of large-scale infrastructure projects. In post-conflict settings, patronage dynamics and limited management capacity make it unlikely that PRP schemes will be administered effectively, and hence further reduce their chances of success.

The overarching question that arises with regard to selection and pay in post-conflict settings is thus: What are the selection and pay strategies that optimize public service capacity to provide public goods under the constraint of needing to keep the peace? As of today, there is little empirical research on the impact of different selection mechanism designs in post-conflict and other settings. Such research could pursue several promising avenues.

For example, research could explore whether mechanisms that explicitly allow for some degree of patronage and politicization improve candidate selection. The fact that past programs were de jure meritocratic but de facto often captured by

patronage interests quickly undermined their reputation. Providing more formalized spaces for patronage could limit this. One option could be to experiment with so-called hybrid appointment schemes (see [Matheson et al. 2007](#)), which allow for political selection from a meritocratically preselected pool of candidates. Another strategy could be to focus the mandates of PSCs on overseeing merit for select professional groups deemed critical for service capacity, while offering purely political appointees positions in parallel, in order to reduce politicization pressure on the merit program.

Second, investigating how the public service can attract a new generation of performance- and pro-socially motivated recruits if it is tarnished by a reputation of patronage and poor performance. Well-paid Young Professional or Senior Executive Service programs, such as implemented in Liberia, may prove narrow enough for protecting merit and thus provide a means of creating a passage through the service that has a superior reputation. Such programs also create a mechanism for increasing the share of meritocratic recruitment. Conversely, in the face of such programs, how can a sense of value be provided to an old generation of public servants who may not easily adapt to modern management practices?

Third, how can development partners design selection mechanisms for well-paid capacity-injection schemes, in view of balancing the qualification of recruits and their acceptance within the public service? In financing and designing such schemes (such as the PRR in Afghanistan), development partners typically face a difficult trade-off. Donors can tightly supervise meritocratic selection to hire the most qualified, but these recruits might get sidelined on the job if they lack acceptance by their superiors and peers. It will therefore be critical for such research to measure “on the job” performance and acceptance of the recruit by colleagues. This could be a fruitful field for experimental research, as donors often exert significant control over the design of capacity injection schemes, and could help implement an experimental use of different selection mechanisms. A qualitative review of Liberia’s Young Professional Program, which injected meritocratically selected young professionals into the public service, indicated positive impacts of such a scheme acting in parallel to standard service recruitment mechanism ([Innovations for Successful Societies 2017](#)).

How Can Conflicting Public Service Identities Be Managed?

The identities of elite groups and public servants play a critical role in shaping how different actors in the public administration view each other. Each identity group aims to target resources to their “within group” ([Munshi and Rosenzweig 2015](#)), with greater fragmentation in identity leading to larger constraints on how resources are distributed across the public service ([Neggers 2018](#)).

Conflict frequently polarizes identities—between warring factions, perhaps along ethnic lines; winners and losers in the conflict; the “old” and the “new” regime; and diaspora returnees and those who stayed throughout the conflict. Public servants with “hostile” identities often have to work with one another and these identities are often more salient than that of the nascent and weakly defined public service. In South Sudan, civil servants from the Khartoum’s garrison town administration were merged with staff of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army’s Civil Authority for the New Sudan (CANS), many of whom were former liberation fighters. Liberia’s interim administration carved up different ministries between warring factions. The result can be disruption of the collaboration needed for efficient public service functioning.

Recent literature in economics (Akerlof and Kranton 2010; Akerlof and Shiller 2015; Collier 2016) and public administration (Balfour and Wechsler 1996; Heintzman and Marson 2005) emphasizes the role of identities (the way people see themselves, e.g., as public servants), their interaction with social norms (the constraints on internalizing specific identities) and narratives (the implied links between actions and outcomes). Seabright (2016) presents a formal model that integrates these three constructs, and highlights key aspects of their interactions. A common identity among public officials as servants of their country can be a platform for strengthened state capacity (Besley and Ghatak 2008) but a fragmented one can be a bottleneck. Ethiopia’s experience with its “Change Army” initiative, where civil servants formed units to support each other in service delivery activities, has been perceived broadly positively across the service (World Bank 2019a). Khan (2020) presents evidence from Pakistan’s health sector that emphasizing a common organizational mission leads to improvements in health services.

These concepts are highly salient to understanding post-conflict public services, as the identity gap between civil servants recruited pre- and post-conflict illustrates (Blum et al. 2019). For example, Afghanistan’s public service in the early 2000s comprised public servants in their 40s and 50s who had been recruited pre-Taliban, and a younger generation of post-2002 recruits, often recent university graduates or qualified diaspora returnees. Both groups of staff had very different identities and contributed different endowments to their functions. The old generation may have seen itself as a means of continuity in the face of significant change. This generation held valuable institutional memory, and had the acceptance, authority, and extensive networks that facilitated getting things done. In contrast to the new generation of recruits, this old generation, however, often had great difficulty in adjusting to change, in particular in acquiring the English and computing skills that became critical for interacting with donors. A “clash of cultures” between these two groups had to be managed for the service to work effectively.

Social norms can reinforce these identities, with a common respect for seniority, or undermine them by branding these individuals as being “stuck in the past” and resisting needed reform. The resolution of tensions between identities and norms is

then a function of how officials narrate the effect of their actions. Even in the face of an adverse social norm, an official may believe a narrative that resisting change is the only way to keep the state functioning and to protect his or her own status. Identity and narratives can therefore create barriers to service delivery even in the absence of other political economy barriers.

Whilst conflicting identities may threaten the ability to work productively, the right public service institutions may mitigate those threats. A small emerging empirical literature on the impact of mixed identities on organizational performance highlights the importance of the institutional context. In a Kenyan private sector setting, [Hjort \(2014\)](#) finds that conflicting ethnicities can have a significant negative impact on production. However, he also highlights the importance of the institutional environment on mitigating potential conflict from contrasting identities. Supporting this interpretation, [Rasul and Rogger \(2015\)](#) provide indicative evidence from the Nigerian public sector that mixed identities—in their setting in the form of ethnic affiliation—can in fact have a positive effect on public sector output within the right institutional setting.

In post-conflict settings, public service institutional choices that disregarded this generational identity divide have had adverse effects. Afghanistan's above-mentioned PRR reform, for example, fuelled resentment between an old and a new generation of public servants. PRR tied eligibility for better-paid positions to English and computer literacy skills, criteria that old public servants could not easily meet. This frustrated the old generation, which felt that it deserved recognition and reward for keeping things running during the conflict. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the old generation of civil servants resented the appointment of diaspora returnees who studied abroad during conflict to well-paid management positions in the Ministry of Finance ([Blum et al. 2019](#)). Finding the appropriate institutional arrangements to capitalize on the assets of both generations and help them work together effectively is thus key to building state capacity. Specifically, remuneration and training systems could be designed that offer pathways to older civil servants being recognized and respected in a changing environment.

The discussion above motivates a research agenda into those institutional mechanisms that can mitigate potential tensions between conflicting identities in the post-conflict environment, and optimally use the diversity of perspectives to better confront complex problems. Interventions may be able to shift social norms and narratives in a way that reinforces identities in support of reform, but this logic is predicated on a clear understanding of the interactions between these concepts. Identifying interventions that can forge a common identity across public service factions, or heighten the salience of service-wide missions, may be one way of reducing conflicts between different groups.

Similarly, if ex-combatants are absorbed into the public service, it raises the question of how to handle their presence in view of enabling the wider service to recover from conflict. Is it possible to accommodate ex-combatants by granting

them particular titles and status, but keeping line-management positions staffed with more experienced managers? If ex-combatants do occupy senior management positions, and lack basic skills for performing their function, how can capacity of the rank-and-file be built from below? How can ex-combatants' identities be influenced and reshaped in view of reducing the likelihood of their resumption of violence? What training format best suits officials who have most recently known military life? A strong focus on public servants' role in serving the nation through trainings and marketing campaigns may provide a foundation for a joint service identity.

How Can Public Servants' Capacity Be Built in Post-conflict Environments?

Development partners face two stylized options for building state capacity post-conflict. They can seek to build capacity *inside* the core public service, or they can seek to *bypass* the core public service by creating so-called "parallel structures" for service delivery, typically staffed by well-paid technical assistants. To build capacity inside the public service, international donors spend substantial resources on training public servants (World Bank 2017). Training can be delivered to public servants by outside trainers, such as international consulting firms, by investing in domestic public service training institutes or by providing officials with subsidized access to institutions of higher education, frequently outside the country. Parallel structures refer to donor-supported units that perform government functions, but use systems and procedures that differ from country systems and human resources that are paid, recruited, or managed by donors (Blum et al. 2019).

In balancing these options, development partners confront difficult trade-offs between short-run service delivery and long-run state building objectives. One the one hand, parallel structures provide an effective answer to a core short-term dilemma characteristic of post-conflict situations, that service delivery needs are pressing but public service capacity to meet them is weak. Development partners have therefore heavily relied on parallel structures in these settings. As of 2018, there was a total of over 28,000 mostly donor-funded TAs and advisers employed by the Government of Afghanistan on- and off-budget (World Bank 2018). Programs delivered through such parallel structures, such as Afghanistan's Basic Package of Health Services and its National Solidarity Program, have had major positive impacts on human and economic development.

On the other hand, relying on parallel structures can put the long-run objective of building a capable state at risk. As donor-financed projects compete with the core public service for scarce skills, the best public officials select out of public service and into technical assistance. This distorts the labor market and the incentives of public officials away from the sustainable development of the public service. Further, when donor project financing ends, governments face pressure to either absorb

technical assistants into the public service at higher pay levels, or risk a severe loss of institutional memory and performance. Governments may not be able to afford the high pay of technical assistance staff at scale. If they do, absorbing such staff onto the government payroll often demotivates other civil servants, who perceive the high pay differentials to be unfair.

How well parallel structures perform on these competing objectives of short-run service delivery and long-run capacity building largely hinges on their design. Based on a small sample of parallel structures that they review, [Blum et al. \(2019\)](#) find that there do exist cases in which technical assistance has gradually helped to build the capacity of public servants and subsequently hand over their tasks to them. By 2015, Afghanistan's treasury department, for example, was largely run by public servants, with the role of international technical assistance limited to maintaining the financial management information system. Afghanistan's budget department, by contrast, remained nearly entirely dependent on national technical assistance, with public servants playing only marginal roles. In the treasury department, two main factors facilitated capacity transfer to civil servants. First, newly introduced systems sought to build on familiar preexisting accounting practices and second, the department was led by a civil servant invested in building his staff's capacity.

The sustainability problem with parallel structures can, in theory, also be resolved by making them permanent. They can be full substitutes for the public service in the medium term, replacing the need for government agencies, with no capacity building or transition objectives. A small body of literature has explored this possibility. [Bold, Collier, and Zeitlin \(2009\)](#) put forth theoretical arguments (rooted in principal-agent theory) for why so-called Independent Service Authorities (ISAs) can be expected to fare better than government or NGO provision of public services. The authors define an ISA as "a public agency outside the civil service, somewhat analogous to an Independent Revenue Authority and a central bank". These authors argue that ISAs do better in holding their agents to account and better coordinate efforts. The delivery of Afghanistan's Basic Package of Health Services can be considered as a successful example, modeled along the lines of an ISA, which led to a dramatic improvement in health outcomes ([Newbrander et al. 2014](#)).

There may, however, be political constraints to the long-term viability of ISA-type delivery arrangements. At least for health services, many post-conflict countries—including, for example, Timor-Leste, Sierra Leone, and Liberia—have reverted to delivery by public servants after an initial emergency phase dominated by NGO-delivery. This suggests that NGO-delivery and ISA models may remain the exception, perhaps because they are not politically attractive enough. They may not contribute sufficiently to state legitimacy or conflict with political elites' desire to control public resources. If tight external oversight of ISAs by donors were to be removed, parallel delivery structures such as out-contracting of basic health services in Afghanistan might lose their effectiveness, being exposed to rent-seeking logics by local elites.

Interestingly, a nascent literature on aid and government legitimacy does not indicate a particularly stark tradeoff, with citizens perceiving governments positively who can organize the delivery of aid (Dietrich et al. 2018; Croke 2020; Lyall et al. 2020).

While reliance on parallel structures is hence certainly no panacea, seeking to build the capacity of public servants post-conflict through training has been equally challenging. It is a large and often wasteful spending area for donors, with no or little rigorous evidence to underpin the effective targeting and design of trainings. A 2010 USAID report, for example, bluntly describes capacity building efforts in Southern Sudan as “currently neither strategic nor focused. With few exceptions, [its] objectives are sweeping, unspecific, detached from actual performance, impossible to measure, and thus unlikely to succeed.” A recent review of the experiences with public service training institutes in Rwanda, Uganda and Liberia (World Bank 2016) concludes that “given that none of the institutes have implemented systematic monitoring and evaluation so far, reliably assessing whether they are effective at increasing individual and ultimately institutional capacity is not possible for the time being.”

Public sector training programs can be successful. Banerjee et al. (2020) study police in Rajasthan through a randomized control trial and find that the provision of training on professional skills (i.e., investigation and methods) and soft skills (i.e., communication and mediation) improved crime victims’ satisfaction with the police. Azulai et al. (2020) showcase that an innovative training program in Ghana can catalyze the impact of standard public service training. However, common problems leading to ineffective training programs are that trainees are selected non-strategically and sometimes based on patronage concerns, their content is insufficiently tailored to the capacity and on-the-job needs of participants, and they are typically short-term with limited follow-up (Muralidharan and Singh 2020).

The political economy of fragile states may also contribute to the inefficiency of training programs. Whereas public officials regularly identify capacity building as one of their highest priorities (Roger 2017), politicians may not share this view if their incentives for improving service delivery are weak, and hence not invest in public service quality. Conversely, they may use donor-funded training programs as a way of rewarding political clients within the public service, as training participation is often associated with attractive allowances or travel.

The central question for further research into parallel structures is how initial and later design choices influence their performance on the competing objectives of immediate service delivery and sustainable capacity building. A World Bank review of efforts to build public service capacity in fragile states concludes that, “A clear message for all FCS countries is that the short-term expedient approaches to ‘buy capacity’ must be taken with a coordinated and clear exit strategy, which does not exist so far in any FCS country”, (World Bank 2015). Blum et al. (2019) identify the following factors as key to determining whether a sustainable balance is struck in designing parallel structures: (a) whether the organization is led by a civil servant

(good for sustainability) or TA; (b) the extent to which continuity with existing rules, systems, and staff is sought, or whether preexisting systems are replaced in a ‘*tabula rasa*’ approach; and, (c) the overall mix between international and national technical assistants, civil servants, and other staff groups working in the unit (the “right balance” must be struck here between external capacity and local absorption capacity). Verifying these factors quantitatively would be a useful contribution to the literature.

There is also a broad research agenda around the effective training of public officials. What selection mechanisms ensure that the appropriate officials attend particular trainings? What is the optimal training curriculum for capacitating public services in fragile states? How can in-the-classroom and on-the-job training methods be combined to make the training relevant to the actual work of public officials? Across each of these questions, how should training results be measured, so as to ensure ongoing refinement of capacity building to best improve service delivery?

A Research Agenda

What We Know

How should public administrations be rebuilt in post-conflict societies? A summary of the very limited evidence that exists would be as follows. Reform needs to start from the premise that the overarching need to secure peace comes at the cost of building a capable state, with public jobs being used as a rent to secure peace. The political dynamics between central and decentralized elites constrain the extent to which centralized control over the public service can be achieved, as often advocated by development partners. Second-best *de jure* public service institutions should take into account these political bargains, or risk being evaded *de facto*.

If centrally-set rules are subject to evasive responses by decentralized players, central players (such as civil service commissions or ministries of finance) can adopt three distinct strategies. One, they can avoid “overplaying their hand” by opting for institutions that grant a significant amount of autonomy to decentralized players, knowing that attempts at tighter central controls would be evaded anyway. For example, central players could give line-ministries more discretion over managing their establishment. Two, they can seek to design “second-best” institutions that are easier to enforce than “first best standards”, at the price of being more basic. For example, payroll controls can (initially) focus on ensuring that payees are legitimate public servants, rather than attempting to ensure that pay levels match the grade of each public servant, which is much more information-demanding. Three, they can support asymmetric reform approaches that target efforts to selected decentralized players, such as reform-minded line-ministers, pragmatically working with the willing.

For selection into public service, this framework highlights the need for institutions that integrate political and meritocratic criteria, for example through hybrid

appointment schemes. In parallel, meritocratic recruitment of selected staff groups, such as young professionals programs and Senior Executive Service schemes can yield “pockets of effectiveness”. Under tight fiscal constraints, differentiated pay strategies can support such pockets of effectiveness, but risk spinning out of control, being used for patronage or provoking resentment among public servants. These risks need to be managed carefully. Investing into building a common identity across the public service is critical to address fragmentation produced by conflict, between different warring factions represented in the service, and old and new generations of public servants. Short-term service delivery needs may need to be met through “parallel structures”, such as donor-funded technical assistance, non-governmental organizations, or independent service authorities. However, there should be a clear trajectory to transition these structures into the public service.

The Research Frontier

Given the dearth of research on public service reform in post-conflict settings, the research frontier can be demarked succinctly. There is a well-established literature on macro reform trajectories in OECD countries and an emerging micro literature on selecting and motivating civil servants in both OECD and developing countries. The validity of these findings for post-conflict contexts is questionable and it is an open question as to what existing results on public administration extend to post-conflict settings. The stark differences in institutional features in post-conflict settings also raise novel questions. We now turn to summarizing those questions by splitting them between those with a macro and those with a micro focus.

Macro Questions

This paper has argued that political settlements between centralized and decentralized elites are central to explaining post-conflict public service reform trajectories. There is, however, little analytical infrastructure that seeks to unpack further how the specific nature of political settlements shapes these trajectories (building on [North, Wallis, and Weingast \(2009\)](#) and [Khan \(2010, 2018\)](#)). What could a more systematic political economy framework look like that provides leverage for understanding the divergent public service reform trajectories in fragile settings? Developing such a framework would be a primary contribution to the literature on fragile and post-conflict states.

Most fundamentally, such a framework could help predict which functions post-conflict governments can realistically take on. While this paper has assumed that there is some underlying rationale for fragile governments to deliver broad public services, the evidence shows that over a decade post-conflict, many governments remain heavily reliant on parallel structures for delivering basic services. Should government

hence simply aim to keep the peace? Given the macro-bargain of a particular context, what are the public services that are most likely to be sustainably provided? How feasible are they to produce given the existing structure of the public service?

As the threat of a resumption of violence recedes, the optimal scope of government may expand. What does this mean for the dynamic structure of the public administration? More needs to be understood about how the transition of the prevailing elite bargain leads to potential changes in the optimal scope of the public service. There is also an interaction between government's ability to deliver public services and keeping the peace, and changing the elite bargain. A more coherent framework for modeling the dynamics of choices in this setting than those referenced would more clearly highlight the role of the public service in securing or destabilizing the peace.

Another fruitful avenue of research might focus on understanding how the nature of elite bargains shapes the space for institutional reforms of the public service. Is there, for example, any scope for citizens in post-conflict settings to coalesce around meritocratic reform in a politically salient way, in broad analogy to the dynamics that underpinned the U.S. Pendleton Act? As part of the peace bargain, centralized elites often have to cede decision-making power to powerful decentralized players. Peace agreements in Afghanistan, Liberia and South Sudan all distributed administrative authority across conflicting factions. What are the factors that determine the extent to which elites (de)centralize control over civil service establishment, pay, and recruitment decisions in post-conflict settings? How do institutional legacies interact with post-conflict reforms in shaping public service trajectories? Why, for example, has Liberia's pay system become highly individualized and discretionary, while it remains tightly controlled in Sierra Leone? Evidence on what reforms can be undertaken with different levels of central control would provide a menu of public administration reform in different settings.

If domestic political elites have weak or no incentives for building a capable public service, how and to what extent can external development partners use their leverage to encourage progress towards these ends? A central policy question here is how to design aid interventions in a setting with divergent elite interests. A research agenda on public service reform in this case thus needs to pay at least equal attention to the motives of principals—the centralized elites—as it does to their agents—the bulk of public officials—with the latter having been the focus of experimental research so far (Finan, Olken, and Pande 2015).

Micro Questions

At the micro-level, there is significant scope to understand how the unique post-conflict context impacts the results of pre-existing studies on recruitment and the provision of incentives. Replicating studies such as Dal Bó, Finan, and Rossi (2013) or Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang (2015) in a post-conflict environment would allow

a better understanding of the external validity of the literature surveyed in [Finan et al. \(2015\)](#).

Beyond replication, extensions to the existing literature that are specific to our setting would be a natural avenue for research. Given the importance of the political settlements in post-conflict countries, and the nascent nature of the state, political interference in the bureaucracy is frequent. Research is needed to better understand the relationship between civil servants and politicians in post-conflict environments and how it can be managed. Large-scale public servant surveys would be of value, as would novel data collection that provides direct evidence on the relationship between these groups. However, of greatest value would be research that investigated mechanisms for limiting political interference in the public service. For example, there is a need to better understand how to design hybrid recruitment schemes that allow for a limited degree of politicization and patronage. Can such schemes indeed yield more productive recruits than *de jure* meritocratic schemes that get evaded *de facto*?

Given the heterogeneous composition of post-conflict public services, it would also be fruitful to experiment with asymmetric pay schemes and associated recruitment mechanisms that seek to accommodate the different forms of ‘merit’ applicable to different staff groups. How to design pay schemes such that a new generation of well-educated recruits, an old generation of public servants who kept the state running during war and ex-combatants, who liberated the country, all feel recognized? Simple labor survey evidence on how candidates view the career profiles and opportunities of post-conflict public services would be a useful input to the design of experiments on pay and selection into post-conflict service. Trialing different forms of career management would be a complement to experiments on recruitment.

Given the fractured nature of identity in most post-conflict settings, there is a need to understand how to design interventions that promote reconciliation and reshape group identities around new joint missions, (seeking to make diversity a positive force for service delivery). One potential approach is to match senior and junior civil servants in pairs, who then work together, learn from each other, and are jointly accountable for their work. Evidence on low-cost identity-focused interventions that can motivate public servants but do not directly draw on the wage bill would also have significant policy value, because resources for post-conflict state-building are typically scarce. One avenue to explore is shifting identities towards service delivery goals, such as around the theme of “rebuild the country”.

Much aid-financing has been devoted to public service capacity-building programs in post-conflict environments, but their track-record is poor, and reliable evidence on their impacts scarce. There is hence a dire need for undertaking rigorous evaluations of these programs, focused on measuring their impact on the on-the-job performance of trainees. The emphasis should be on three main design issues: how to decide which public servants are eligible for participating in training programs to

ensure a cost-effective use of resources; which training methods (e.g., classroom vs. on the job) are most effective in making the training relevant to the day-to-day work of the officials; and how to preserve the capacity-investment in the longer-term, by incentivizing trained officials to share their knowledge with peers or by managing the risk of them being ‘promoted away’?

An Experimental Approach to Reform

In many instances, retrospective analysis is constrained to analyzing why “good practice” reforms were not or partially adopted, failed to yield desired impacts or led to unintended consequences. By contrast, instances where governments have attempted contextualized “second-best” reforms remain too scattered for identifying a new “second best” approach with any confidence (Andrews 2015).

What is needed is a systematic research agenda that experiments with unconventional interventions conditioned on the macro-political dynamics of fragile contexts. This may mean testing approaches that seem to fit the context but deviate from proven practice elsewhere. In the face of an absence of evidence on novel reform solutions, experimentation and rigorous evaluation should be the guiding principle of reform design in these settings.

It is important to recognize, however, that the space for twinning policy experimentation with experimental research designs is constrained in post-conflict setting. Experimental research in a post-conflict setting must contend with a “conundrum of control”. Experiments, almost by definition, require a high degree of control to ensure treatment and control groups are isolated. Yet, in post-conflict administrations, the very challenge is exactly the low degree of control over reform implementation. The set of institutions where this control can be assured is therefore likely narrower than in non-conflict contexts. The space for successfully conducting experimental research may be restricted to the most stable settings, such as those of parallel structures. The validity of these studies for the post-conflict environment will likely be a significant improvement over existing results from non-post-conflict settings, but it will be important to carefully translate the results into the broader service.

Making progress in developing this evidence base is crucial given the stakes for current and state-building efforts, be they in Afghanistan, South Sudan, or Yemen. Such research provides a window into the origins of state capacity itself, and so has broad relevance for the field as a whole.

Notes

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