



Executive Summary **5**

State of the Art Paper

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Political engagement with non-state actors in areas of limited statehood

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Even where there are no functioning state structures, few societies remain ungoverned. Often non-state actors (NSAs) provide the goods, services and protections that the state may – for whatever reason – be unable to deliver to its citizens. NSAs include community-based and civil society groups, humanitarian and development organisations, armed actors and opposition groups, and the private sector and business interests, all working at various levels. There is currently no coherent view in the development community about whether donors and practitioners should engage with such actors. However, the evidence suggests that truly inclusive political settlements will need to involve any NSAs able to exercise significant economic, political, or social influence on the development process, regardless of whether this influence is positive or negative.

This paper surveys the literature on development and NSAs. It sets out the evidence for the merits of engaging politically with NSAs by incorporating them into governance and statebuilding programmes, and examines the challenges this may pose. The paper aims to shed light on current research on the role of NSAs in shaping, making and undermining the legitimacy of the state, and to identify gaps for future research.

This paper defines NSAs as actors that are not part of the internationally and nationally recognised sovereign state, but exert notable influence (whether positive or negative) on the functioning of the state. It focuses on four groups of NSAs: civil society actors, private actors, armed NSAs and non-citizen migrants.

The main search terms used were 'non-state actors,' 'non-state services,' 'civil society,' 'state-society relations,' and 'armed non-state actors'.

The key research questions were:

- How do states, donors, (I)NGOs, and bilateral and multilateral agencies currently engage with NSAs, and what are the assumptions driving this engagement?
- From where do NSAs gain their legitimacy and how significant is legitimacy for engagement?
- What are the key factors determining non-state engagement in political processes?
- How do different types of actors engage in different ways (i.e. what factors account for the making and breaking of non-state political settlements)?
- What is the relationship between NSAs and the state at different levels?
- If a decision is made to engage with NSAs, what form should this engagement take, and what are the currently available mechanisms for facilitating it?
- What challenges and unintended consequences might emerge as a result of working with NSAs?

Key findings

There is currently a lack of clear consensus about what defines an NSA. Definitions that attempt to provide any detail beyond 'not a state, but exerting influence' tend to adopt a set of **normative assumptions** about whether this influence is positive or negative; how practitioners engage with an NSA often depends on this judgement.

Most empirical case studies examining donor engagement with NSAs focus on civil society groups – primarily women's and religious groups (even if there is relatively little attempt made by donors to understand the internal dynamics of these groups). Other types of NSAs receive less focus because engaging with them involves operational and theoretical problems. Although much of the literature on non-state actor engagement is focused on civil society, it does not critically examine what engagement with civil society entails, or what benefits and challenges it brings.

Much of the emergent literature on the role of the **private sector** in development focuses on large multinational companies. However, the private sector also encompasses a complex network of smaller companies, informal economies and business associations. Less attention has been paid to these smaller local companies and developing states' business elites.

Private actors can be useful in delivering public services in the face of state incapacity/unwillingness, but if not well managed, this can weaken citizens' faith in the state in the long-term.

In situations of limited statehood, **armed NSAs** can provide a range of securities and public goods. Further research could be conducted into whether these governance-like activities can be transformed post-conflict into legitimate political action.

Most research on armed groups in post-conflict situations focuses on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes. Further research could be conducted into whether including armed groups in post-conflict political settlements improves or hinders the legitimacy of the settlement, or deters armed groups from spoiling developmental processes.

General research on the role of NSAs in developing states tends to focus on citizens, even though **protracted migrant communities** are common. Relatively little research has been conducted into the alternative rights and agency that migrants without citizenship rights assert, and the effect that this has on political settlements.

Conclusions

- The evidence suggests that there is a need to engage politically with all NSAs able to exercise significant economic, political, or social influence on the development process, regardless of whether this influence is positive or negative.
- Such engagement will vary in degree from case to case, but as a minimum will involve ensuring that influential NSAs are consulted during development programming. Where appropriate, it may be necessary for development organisations to engage directly with certain NSAs as influential political entities in their own right.
- Much of the literature focuses on civil society groups, yet there are several other prominent types of NSAs that also need to be included if a political settlement is to be considered truly inclusive. Care will be needed to avoid normative prejudices against particular groups automatically excluding or including particular strategies for engaging with them. Further research into engagement with these actors would be valuable.
- While civil society actors are seen as the link to creating positive state-society relations, reifying civil society actors as legitimate may present its own dilemmas. Care needs to be taken to note the uncivil elements of civil society and the unintended consequences that can emerge from strong civil society campaigns.
- Incentives for private sector engagement in development programmes need to ensure that they do not amount to corruption, and that private actors are co-producing with the state, rather than substituting for the state.

Download the full paper at: <http://publications.dlprog.org/NSAs.pdf>

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