



# Policy Brief: Concepts of Peacebuilding and State Building – How Compatible Are They?

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## Executive summary

Peacebuilding and state building have been discussed in the past as concepts having a difficult relationship with one another, at times involving trade-offs and even dilemmas. Analysing this relationship on the basis of relevant OECD/DAC documents, this policy brief argues that the two concepts in fact represent different perspectives on a very similar underlying problem (i.e. fragile social peace and the destruction of political order). Beyond this difference, they are largely congruent as regards their positive vision, their action-guiding principles and even the areas of engagement suggested by each of them. This surprisingly high degree of congruence most likely reflects lessons learned in recent discussions of state building within the DAC context from both past experiences in state-building efforts and the older peacebuilding debate. Consolidating the two strands of the debate into one common framework of moving “from fragility to resilience” could be a logical way forward. However, such an approach should not be considered to solve the dilemmas or trade-offs debated in the past. These tensions should rather be considered as typical concomitants of the societal processes that underlie the contexts in which peacebuilding and state building alike operate.

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*"[...] peacebuilding is primarily associated with post-conflict environments, and state building is likely to be a central element of it [...]"* (OECD/DAC 2008a, 13)

*"Peacebuilding, understood as activities [...] to prevent violent conflict and institutionalise peace, is often an important part of the state-building dynamic [...]"*  
(OECD/DAC 2008b, 2)

## 1. Introduction

The recent international debate on state building (SB) and peacebuilding (PB) is characterised by a considerable degree of conceptual confusion with regard to each of the two concepts individually and their relation with each other. Statements such as those quoted above indicate that some clarification is needed if policy makers and practitioners on the ground are expected to benefit from conceptual debates instead of being confused by them.

The aim of this policy brief is to discuss the relationship of peacebuilding and state building on the basis of OECD/DAC documents that represent the latest available consensus among development agencies. In the case of peacebuilding, the appropriate reference document is the DAC Guidelines of 1997/2001, complemented by a manual published in 2005 (OECD/DAC 2001; 2005). As for state building, we refer to the 2007 principles for engagement in fragile states, a 2008 "initial findings" paper on state building and a comprehensive 2008 DAC Discussion Paper (OECD/DAC 2007; 2008a; 2008b).<sup>1</sup>

This approach comes with two limitations that are important to bear in mind. First, while DAC documents represent a consensus – if not on matters, than at least on the state of the debate – among DAC member state governments in general (plus international organisations, such as UNDP), it is nonetheless first and foremost a consensus of the government-related *development community*. In terms of concepts and terminology, both PB and SB are discussed in different ways or with different nuances within the traditional foreign policy and security communities.

Second, PB and SB are discussed not only in policy circles but also, of course, in academic and public debates. In these communities, conceptualisations of the two terms often differ from those found in strategy papers that seek to guide policies. When concentrating on policy documents, thus, we do not deny the legitimate existence outside the development policy community of PB and SB conceptions that differ from those discussed here.

Our analysis compares PB and SB with respect to four major categories: (1) the *perspective* each of the concepts adopts *with regard to* certain *end goals*, or purposes; (2) the type of "*positive visions*" they refer to as points of reference for PB and SB activities respectively; (3) action-guiding *principles* that underpin the engagement in each of the two fields; and finally (4) intersections and differences with regard to *areas of engagement* suggested for PB and SB.

Contrary to common assumptions, the analysis presented here does not support the notion that PB and SB are in important respects at odds with each other. While they do represent different perspectives on a very similar underlying problem (i.e. fragile social peace and the destruction of

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1 While strictly speaking the 2008 Discussion Paper does not represent an official position, it is meant to "help promote greater consensus and clarity within and outside the DAC on what state building means" (OECD/DAC 2008a, 3)

political order), they are largely congruent as regards their positive vision and action-guiding principles. Likewise the two concepts overlap to a large degree when it comes to areas of engagement suggested by each of them. Even where there are no explicit overlaps, complementarity is more likely to prevail than outright competition.

For the most part, we conclude, this high degree of congruence can probably be explained as a result of learning and knowledge transfer processes that have occurred in recent SB debates and have clearly informed documents such as the 2008 DAC Discussion Paper.

Statements which imply that PB and SB are competing concepts that present profound dilemmas or which regard one of the concepts as a subset of the other usually refer to earlier conceptions or to those from outside the development policy arena. Rather than being mutually exclusive or representing opposing poles of a continuum, the two concepts – while they can be distinguished for analytical purposes – should be viewed as two sides of the same coin.

More than anything, PB and SB are separated by the historical and political contexts within which each of them has evolved and operates. It is useful to be aware of these contexts in order to better understand the origins of statements that emphasise tensions and trade-offs. The next section will therefore present a short overview of the evolution of the two concepts, highlighting the fact that both underwent a broadening of scope. In the sections that follow, we address, in turn, the issues of perspective (section 3), visions and principles (section 4), and areas of engagement (section 5), before coming to final conclusions.

## 2. The evolution of the concepts

While the question of how to bring about lasting peace has been a concern of political philosophy for many centuries, the roots of the contemporary concept of peacebuilding date back to efforts by the United Nations in the late Cold War period to help end collective violence within as well as across states. Peacebuilding evolved to a full-fledged concept of international engagement during the 1990s – i.e. in the face of civil wars and inter-ethnic violent conflict that could no longer be attributed to superpower rivalry. Major development policy documents representing the donor consensus of the time were produced at the DAC level in 1997 and 2001<sup>2</sup>. Individual donor countries complemented this debate by adopting their own guidelines or strategy papers. In Germany, within a general foreign policy context defined by a 2004 government “Action Plan on Civilian Crisis Prevention” (Bundesregierung 2004), BMZ adopted a Strategy for Peace Building in 2005 (BMZ 2005).

Just as with peace, the origins and making of the state have been a concern of political philosophy and social sciences for centuries. In contemporary political thinking, Charles Tilly (1975) was influential in popularising the term “state building” as synonymous for the evolutionary process by which states emerge.<sup>3</sup> In its widely-used current meaning, i.e. referring to external (foreign) contributions to such processes, “state building” came to prominence with U.S.-led military interventions after September 11, 2001, in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recent debates, which have in particular informed discussions within the OECD/DAC, have increasingly pointed to the limits

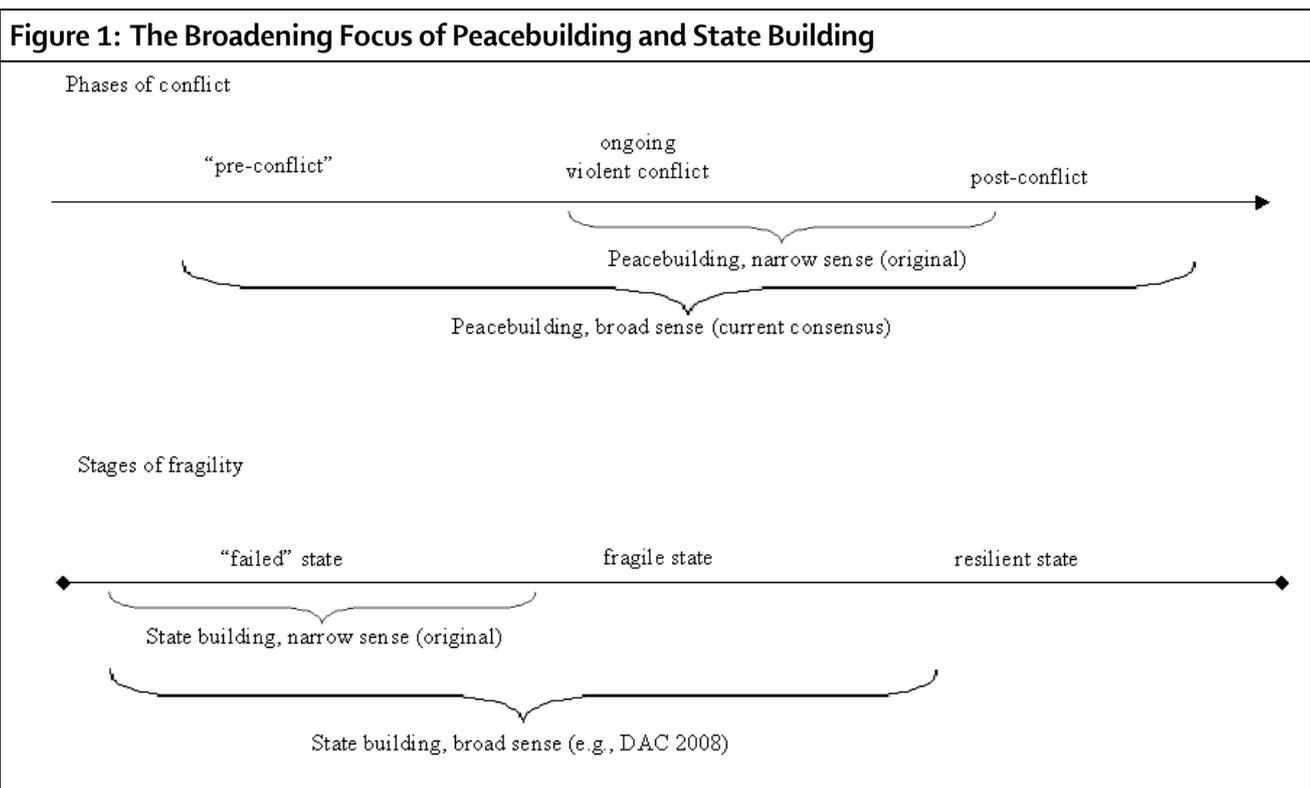
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2 In 2001, the 1997 DAC Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Co-operation on the Threshold of the 21st Century were supplemented with the policy document Helping Prevent Violent Conflict: Orientations for External Partners to form the consolidated DAC Guidelines Helping Prevent Violent Conflict (OECD/DAC 2001).

3 In this sense, the process of “state building” has always been accompanied by violence, hence producing a sharp distinction if compared to the notion of peacebuilding.

inherent in external involvement and instead emphasised the overriding importance of domestic actors. To mark the difference between the evolutionary process referred to by Tilly and others, and state-building activities that actors undertake intentionally, the authors of a comprehensive OECD/DAC Discussion Paper on state building (OECD/DAC 2008a) have recently suggested to refer to the historical process as “state formation” and reserve “state building” for deliberate interventions with a view to influencing (accelerating, steering) that process. While at the DAC level, an ongoing workstream on addressing fragile states has not yet resulted in a comprehensive document comparable to the guidelines on conflict prevention, basic papers representing the current state of the debate have been adopted in recent years (OECD/DAC 2007; 2008b). In the case of Germany, both a strategy paper on “Development-Oriented Transformation In Conditions of Fragile Statehood and Poor Government Performance” and a new strategy paper on promoting good governance address issues pertaining to state building (BMZ 2007; 2009). However, the 2005 Strategy for Peacebuilding is also considered relevant for addressing fragile statehood.

The recognition of the complexity of both PB and SB efforts had similar effects in both debates, with the conceptualisation of SB in influential recent papers echoing the development of the PB concept a decade earlier: both concepts, as they evolved, exhibited a tendency to broaden their focus (see Figure 1): PB was initially used synonymously with peace-keeping and hence confined to the phase of violent conflict and immediate post-conflict; soon, however, peace-builders recognised the interdependence of different stages of peace and conflict and broadened their view of PB to the whole spectrum from the prevention of violent conflict to the long-term formation of sustainable arrangements of conflict management in post-conflict societies. Likewise, state building has in more recent documents (such as OECD/DAC 2008a) abandoned its initial exclusive focus on the reconstruction of political institutions in the immediate “post-breakdown” (usually post-conflict) period, and begun to include the task of working against fragility at various stages.



Concentrating on either one of these two developments some authors have suggested to conceive of PB as a subset of SB activities while others, conversely, have considered SB to be a part of PB. We argue instead that views which consider either term as a subset of the other no longer reflect a fair assessment of the current state of the debate. Just as peacebuilding became a general concept of addressing issues of imminent, ongoing and past violent conflicts, state building has evolved into a generic concept for all kinds of measures geared towards countering different degrees of state fragility.

Useful definitions of peacebuilding and state building, reflecting the current state of the debate within the donor community, can be derived from recent DAC documents on each of the two issues (see Box 1). It is these definitions and the concepts they represent that underlie the analysis below.

**Box 1: Defining peacebuilding and state building**

According to a 2005 DAC “manual” for peacebuilding practitioners

[P]eace-building encompasses measures in the context of emerging, current or post-conflict situations for the explicit purpose of preventing violent conflict and promoting lasting and sustainable peace.

In 2008, the authors of a DAC discussion paper on state building propose

to define state building as purposeful action to develop the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state in relation to an effective political process for negotiating the mutual demands between state and societal groups.

Sources: OECD/DAC 2005; OECD/DAC 2008a.

### 3. Different perspectives

The most relevant difference between PB and SB is the overarching perspective they adopt. While the building of *states* is a task of enormous *instrumental value* for such end goals as peace, (human) security, and a rule-based framework for socio-economic development, it should *not* be considered a *goal in itself*. Modern states have been instrumental in bringing about enormous progress along the lines of these goals, but they have also been the source of tremendous grievances. The abuse of state power by authoritarian governments as a tool to suppress (segments of) their own population is just one type of example to illustrate the point that the ultimate value of a state is determined not only by its *strength* but at least as much by its *purpose* as expressed in the will of its ruling elite.

PB, conversely, is concerned with bringing about an element of favourable development itself, both for individuals and for a social entity; thus, *peace* can justifiably be regarded as an *end goal* (alongside other goals, such as poverty reduction, that are not in the focus of PB) *rather than an instrument*. In short, while peacebuilding is a *multi-faceted “single-purpose” task*, state building can be rather characterised as a *multi-purpose, instrumental task*.

Beside the issue of instrument and purpose, there is a widespread perception that PB and SB differ with regard to their respective level of “intrusiveness”. As a consequence of recent international events, SB is often considered to be more concerned with promoting the self-interest of intervening powers while PB, often under the aegis of the United Nations, appears as a rather “non-partisan” operation in the interest of a population affected by, and suffering from, violent conflict.<sup>4</sup> Although such images may resound with adherents of a traditional understanding of

4 It is interesting to note, though, that in other contexts it is PB which is considered to be the intrusive concept. See, for example, the discussion by Call and Cook (2003) of peacebuilding compared to democratisation.

peacebuilding as a social movement with considerable scepticism vis-à-vis the state, the documents analysed here do not support this view. In fact, as will be discussed later, recent SB documents explicitly denounce the idea of SB by external design.

#### 4. Convergent visions and principles

Despite obvious differences in context, wording and focus, PB and SB share a largely common point of reference, namely situations of fragile social peace and the destruction of basic elements of political order. Moreover, the two concepts are strikingly similar with regard to the positive vision spelled out in major donor documents for each of them respectively: “structural stability” in the case of peacebuilding; and “resilience” in the case of state building. Both terms, if properly understood,<sup>5</sup> refer to properties of a social and political fabric that enable it to absorb internal and external shocks or pressure for change through adaptive processes that do not tend to disrupt but rather help preserve the social contract embodied in the existing institutional make-up (see Box 2).

Likewise, there are clear overlaps in a number of guiding principles, indicating a common understanding as well as a likely transfer of experience and lessons from one debate to the other. Shared basic principles include, *inter alia*, the general recognition that external influence will always be limited; that negative fallout from interventions should be considered in advance and continuously monitored (“do no harm”); that development actors should assist, rather than replace, local institutions; and that all involvement should be planned for the long haul while simultaneously allowing for timely and flexible reaction to changing circumstances. Consequently, both debates stress the importance of establishing comprehensive analytical capacities and using them appropriately. Many analytical instruments that more recent state-building strategies refer to – such as peace and conflict impact assessments or scenario building – were introduced originally in the context of efforts to make PB more effective and have since been transferred to SB strategies.

**Box 2: Positive visions:  
“Structural stability” and “resilience”  
as defined in major DAC documents**

Structural stability:

Structural stability embraces the interdependent and mutually reinforcing objectives of social peace, respect for the rule of law and human rights, social and economic development, supported by dynamic and representative political institutions capable of managing change and resolving disputes without resorting to violent conflict. (OECD/DAC 2001: 86)

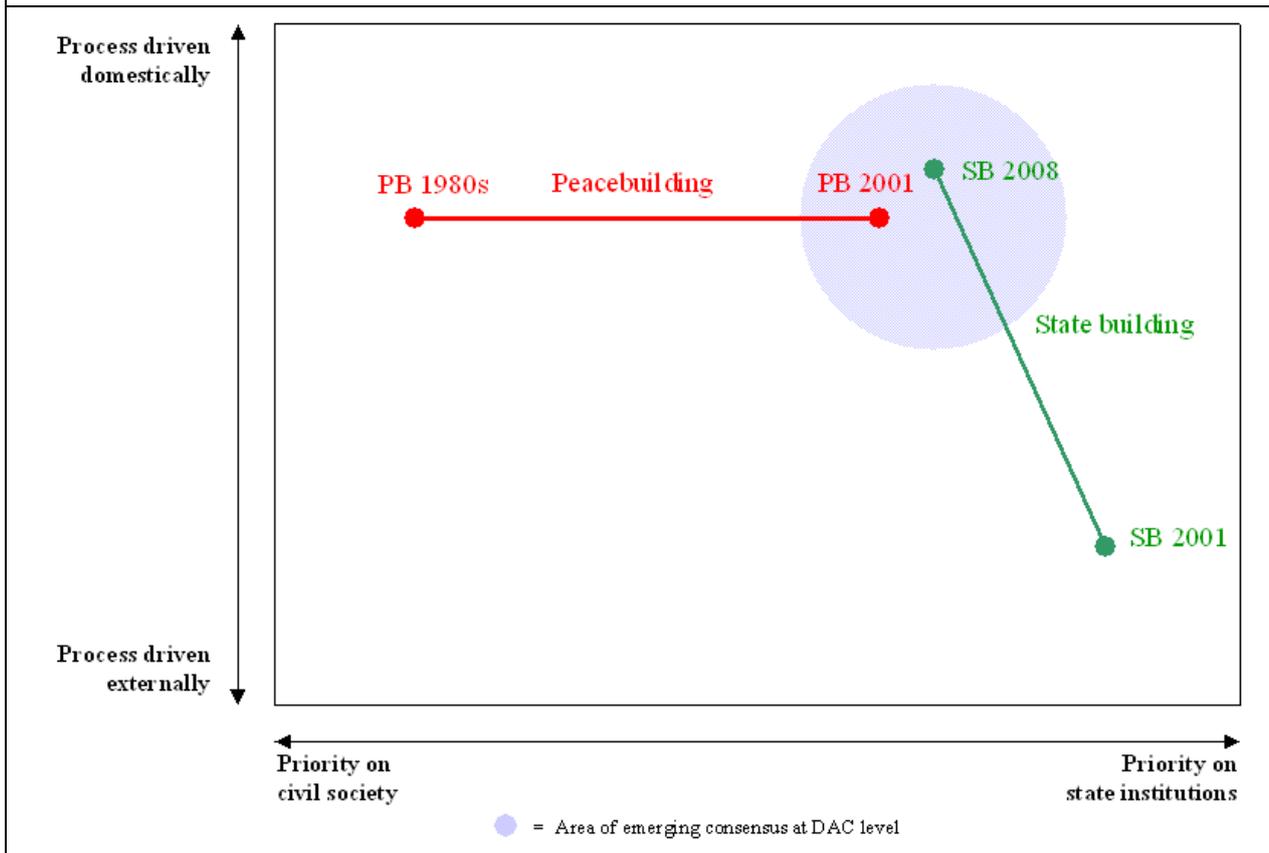
Resilience:

We presume the opposite of fragility not to be stability, though this has often been the goal of external actors, but rather resilience – or the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness, or legitimacy. (OECD/DAC 2008a: 12)

By establishing a positive state-building dynamic, i.e. by developing institutions and enhancing political capacity to manage social expectations while also strengthening legitimacy, states generate resilience. The term “developing state resilience” can thus be used as an alternative term for state building. (OECD/DAC 2008b: 3)

5 At a semantic level, proponents of resilience have rejected “stability” as a useful antonym of state fragility for presumably being too status quo-oriented. Such criticism cannot be justifiably applied to the concept of “structural stability” as referred to in the DAC Guidelines on Helping Prevent Violent Conflict and other donor strategies. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, structural stability is not concerned with the persistence of institutions but rather with properties of a political system (i.e., structures) that render the latter capable of managing change peacefully through adaptation – which is pretty much the same as “resilience”. However, as structural stability appears to lend itself to unnecessary criticism based on superficial reading of the concept’s labeling, it may be justified to suggest an alternative term, such as “resilience”, for basically the same idea.

Figure 2: The evolution of peacebuilding and state building along two key dimensions (highly stylised)



One contradictory principle remains, though: PB prefers liberal democracy as institutional blueprint, while SB recognizes different forms to generate legitimacy. In fact, recent documents on SB have tended to conceive of the overall goal of external engagement as a rather open-ended process. Early SB concepts, at least in the political sphere, had been as explicit as PB in favouring liberal democracy and even more explicit in giving preference to building state institutions almost as a goal in itself (see also Figure 2). Recently, however, deliberations among DAC donors have become more concerned with functional requirements of resilient statehood in a more flexible approach, pointing at questions of legitimacy in general and at the overall political process. Peacebuilding, by contrast, has exhibited considerable continuity in its more explicit preference for the liberal democratic paradigm. However, this fact may no longer be the case, as no major peacebuilding guidelines have been released since 2001. Since then, however, important lessons on the viability of externally led full-scale interventions have been learned. Recent state-building documents seem to have adjusted to this experience and embraced a greater deal of flexibility regarding the design of institutions.

As a consequence of greater open-endedness, authors of the DAC Discussion Paper opted to define priority areas of support in a more detailed way than can be found in PB strategies. By defining three hierarchical levels, they make up for missing clarity on the actual institutional arrangement. The levels comprise overarching political processes, governance programming and policies in key sectors. It is the first level which is instrumental in bringing about clarity over basic institutional arrangements. It prepares the ground for state and society to actively participate in defining the following levels, thus creating a detailed institutional layout better adapted to local needs

than an imported form of government.<sup>6</sup> The peacebuilding perspective, in turn, by having a pre-determined preference for the liberal democracy paradigm, can afford to be less precise on the remaining priorities and dispense with ranking them in a binding way.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Overlapping areas of engagement

As the quotes at the beginning of this paper indicate, recent OECD/DAC state-building documents could be interpreted to describe peacebuilding as a subset of state building, while also discussing the opposite. In particular in post-conflict situations, state building appears to be a central element of peacebuilding, while peacebuilding activities, in turn, have been recognized as important elements of state-building efforts. If such an overlap is interpreted as an indicator of a hierarchical relationship, however, confusion will ensue. The solution to this confusion is to recognize that the two concepts share the same or similar areas of engagement. Both propose to apply similar instruments in similar circumstances, but this does not subordinate one concept to the other.

Looking at the general employment of instruments, both peacebuilding and state building include socio-economic recovery, security sector reform, strengthening civil society and good governance measures. Some differences exist, however. Decentralization, taxation and corruption figure much more prominently on the state building agenda. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), gender issues and emergency relief play a significant role in peacebuilding. These differences can be explained by the primary context each approach originally referred to: consolidation of state capacity and early stages of post-conflict reconstruction respectively. Yet there is no compelling reason to assume that those differences constitute incompatibilities or would lead to serious dilemmas per se. Rather, dilemmas and trade-offs will have to be accepted as being inevitable *within* each of the two concepts as they present themselves today as wholesale approaches for solving fundamental issues of social order which, by all historical experience, cannot be solved without some social costs.

A special case of recommendations are context-dependent actions which each perspective advocates. Peacebuilding perspectives usually define context by conflict stages; state-building perspectives, in turn, by degrees of capacity and willingness. In spite of these differing approaches of categorization, similarities abound. Both concepts agree that windows of opportunity in post-conflict phases have to be taken advantage of. The primacy of diplomatic and military means during peaks of violence is unchallenged. "Submerged tensions" or "political divisions" are to be addressed through mediation. Both approaches suggest strategically reducing development aid

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6 Priorities in state building comprise following elements grouped by the aforementioned levels: (1) The political process includes supporting elite pacts, constitution-making processes, conflict resolution skills and processes at the local level as well as direct mediation in crisis or transition. These measures allow a state and its society to actively steer fundamental institutional decisions to be taken. (2) Governance programming includes creating accountability (without necessarily implying full-fledged democratic elections), decentralised governance structures, the rule of law (avoiding "state capture" at the same time) and general administrative capacity. Having arrived at this stage, the state should be able to lead (3) policies in key sectors for reaching full resilience. These sectors include security, service provision, economic growth, corruption and crime as well as taxation.

7 Priorities in peacebuilding comprise restoring internal security and the rule of law, legitimising state institutions, fostering the re-emergence of civil society, improving food security and social services, and building administrative capacity. No general statement is made on the relationship between these actions except for the emphasis on assessing local circumstances.

for authoritarian governments, balancing the “opposing risks” of legitimizing an unwanted regime and increasing the population’s sufferings.

Eventually, referring to situations of “emerging resilience”, switching quickly to budget support has been proposed as an appropriate strategy in state building. While important documents on peacebuilding, such as the DAC Guidelines, were devised at a time when the international debate over budget support was still in its infancy – and hence made hardly any mention of this instrument – it is probably fair to say that budget support, with its overall emphasis on local ownership and the strengthening of local institutions, is in principle compatible with the logic of structural stability. Slight differences exist only with regard to the degree to which the transformation process is expected to be driven by internal or external actors. In an interesting twist that may come as a surprise in the light of quite intrusive state-building enterprises within the past decade, the most recent DAC documents on state building call explicitly for a “light footprint”. They caution against, for example, the dangers of untimely elections in fragile or even post-conflict situations. DAC peacebuilding documents up until 2001, by contrast, while far from advocating a “heavy footprint”, argued for tackling the “causes of structural conflict” even in difficult situations, preferably including the introduction of liberal democracy. However, as we have argued in the previous section, this difference is not a necessary consequence of an inherent divergence between PB and SB but is probably best explained by the evolution of concepts over the last decade. Thus, assuming an inarticulate learning process of peacebuilding, the assumption of largely congruent areas of engagement holds.

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing from recent OECD/DAC policy documents, this policy brief has assessed the conceptual relationship between peacebuilding and state building. It has demonstrated that both terms have expanded over time and now address virtually every single aspect and phase of peacebuilding and state-building processes; they now share an ever-growing number of instruments and activities. Neither one can be reduced to being a subset of the other. Based on the analysis of DAC documents, it seems fair to say that both concepts have become increasingly congruent.

However, there is widespread perception that PB and SB are distinct concepts representing opposite poles of a continuum. This, it is said, may ultimately lead to difficult trade-offs and dilemmas. We assume that this approach is probably spurred by alternative views of either PB or SB. While differences between the concepts of PB and SB do exist, in particular with regard to their perspectives and immediate purpose, there is a tendency in recent scholarship (e.g., Call and Cousens 2007) as well as policy documents related to the state-building debate (OECD/DAC 2008a) to overemphasise some of the resulting dissimilarities.

To sum up, where trade-offs between, or even the incompatibility of, the two concepts are stressed, such judgements cannot be justifiably based on a fair comparison of documents that represent the latest available consensus among development agencies, such as the DAC documents analysed in this paper.

Rather, the overriding finding is that PB and SB, as conceived by the DAC, ultimately address a common purpose from different perspectives. Staying alert to that purpose is the best way to ensure that the different perspectives of PB and SB generate compatible or complementary approaches of engagement.

Still, the essence behind some of the concerns regarding the dilemmas or trade-offs that have been identified by a number of authors are not unfounded. However, the challenges are not to be expected to result from tensions between two broadly conceived concepts. Rather these dilemmas are almost inevitable concomitants of the societal processes that underlie the contexts in which both PB and SB operate. Both PB and SB are processes that generate winners and losers in every society. Just how a society deals with such a situation, how much it is prepared to use the state as an instrument to promote the winners' interests at the expense of the losers, to what extent elites fuel or mitigate the tensions arising from social and political change – the answers to these and other salient questions are not predetermined by choosing either a PB or a SB perspective but need to be negotiated by local actors regardless of what the international community calls its efforts. Likewise, the choice of donor instruments that best support local processes towards sustainable peace and resilience needs to be based on a thorough analysis of risks and benefits. Such analyses may yield conflicting results depending on available sources, general political preferences or other issues unrelated to the PB or SB debate.

Consequently, future discussions should not contrast PB and SB but aim at a consolidated approach to their common challenge. "From Fragility to Resilience" is a phrase which can pave the way for defining a joint subject matter. This would allow international donors to continue their search for the instruments best-suited for concrete situations of state fragility and violent conflict under a common framework.

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