State Society and Governance in Melanesia

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The Twin Processes of Nation Building and State Building

The term 'nation-building' is used widely in reference to multilateral and bilateral engagements in post-conflict situations and other forms of international assistance to 'fragile' states. In Australia, nation-building has become an important part of the rationale for the Government's increased engagement with its Pacific neighbours in recent years. Australia's role in RAMSI in Solomon Islands, and recent operations in PNG, Tonga and Fiji covers a range of areas, including strengthening the rule of law, building the economy and improving governance standards.

Despite its current prominence in international affairs, 'nation building' remains an imprecise term subject to interpretation. Given this lack of clarity, it is hardly surprising that there is considerable uncertainty about the practicalities of nation-building strategies among governments and non-government actors. Many of the same issues arising in present discussions about building states and nations were raised in earlier debates around decolonisation and independence in Asia and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the Pacific in the 1970s. Unfortunately, the lessons of that period have been largely forgotten by today's nation-builders. 'Nation-building' at that time referred to the policies and projects by which newly independent governments sought to accomplish the transition from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. This entailed building all of the institutions of the modern state. However, it also referred to the self-conscious production and dissemination of national consciousness and included the cultural and educational policies of new states, and the construction and promotion of national identity through schooling, mass media, child socialisation, and the iconography and ceremonies of the state.

More recent analysis has rejected two key presumptions of this earlier approach. Firstly, the ethnocentric and evolutionary analytical framework of 'modernisation' has been largely abandoned. It is no longer assumed that the formation of national identity occurs within the constraints of an inexorable and unilinear process of historical progress whereby 'traditional' communities inevitably give way to 'modern' social forms. Experience from around the world reveals a much more complex and dynamic process of interaction between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and the emergence of new hybrid social forms drawing on both. Secondly, current approaches to the construction of national identities dispense with the assumption that state-building and nation-building are exclusively the concern of recently independent former colonies or other transitional societies. The construction and reproduction of national identity remains a live, continuous and contested issue in every nation-state.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN STATE AND NATION-BUILDING

In the burgeoning literature generated by recent international interventions, there has been a tendency to use the terms 'state-building' and 'nation-building' interchangeably. This has confused different, though closely related, processes of political development and has also obscured the highly contingent relationship between 'nation' and 'state' in historical processes of state-formation and consolidation. The blurring between these two processes is especially marked in American circles where 'nation-building' has acquired a very particular meaning in current security and foreign policy debates. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent ascendancy of the 'war on terror', nation-building has become a favoured antidote among certain Western powers to the security risks posed by 'failed' and 'failing'

Key Points

- Though integrally related, processes of state-building and nation-building are distinct.
- Most current international interventions undertaken in the name of nation-building are focused on state-building.
- Building a functioning state is now an accepted condition for effective nationhood, though not the only one.
- History and local context are absolutely critical to nation-building.
- Many of the difficulties experienced by countries in Australia's neighbourhood reflect both the weakness of state and nation and the reinforcing dynamic between them.
- Nation-building in the broad, literal sense is an ongoing process in all countries.
- External assistance to nation-building in this sense needs to be strategic and facilitative of local processes.
- Active citizenship is a vital component of building a shared political community.
- Nation-building requires a critical focus on state/civil society relations rather than a separate focus on each.

A classroom in Solomon Islands—some observers have identified education as one of the most important stepping stones to national consciousness. Photo ABC Brisbane

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Box 1: State and Nation Building—Definitions

State-building is the task of building functioning and durable states capable of fulfilling the essential attributes of modern statehood. The latter include providing security from external threats and maintaining internal order, raising and collecting taxes, delivering essential services such as health and education, the provision of transport and communications infrastructure, and the prudent management of the economy. State-building, with a focus on strengthening key state institutions, has long been a focus of international development assistance.

Nation-building refers to the broader process of developing a shared sense of political community that is capable of binding together the population of a given state. While the state has a central role in this task, nation-building also requires the mobilisation of a range of non-state stakeholders.

Distinguished in this way, state-building comprises the practical task of establishing or strengthening state institutions, while nation-building is more concerned with the character of relations between citizens and their state.

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states. In this vein, the widely cited RAND Corporation study of American experience in nation-building defines it as "the use of armed force in the aftermath of a conflict to underpin an enduring transition to democracy". While this meaning has acquired a certain currency among security analysts, it remains a highly contentious one. It has nevertheless become an important rationale for militaristic interventions in countries that are deemed to constitute serious threats to international or regional security. Critics have pointed to the low success rates of militarised approaches to nation-building. Not only do they rarely accomplish their stated objectives, these approaches to nation-building have few theoretical underpinnings and no proven technique or methodology. Even where they appear to succeed, the positive result often owes more to historical circumstances and local political culture than it does to the efforts of external nation-builders.

European-based commentators tend to favour the more literal meaning of nation-building and, moreover, often argue that nations as shared communities tend to evolve organically rather than be constructed by external powers. This latter perspective, reflecting the different historical experience of countries in that region, recognises that in addition to a functioning state, nation-building in this broader sense requires the nurturing of a common sense of identity where none previously existed, or shoring up one that was never fully established, or that has fragmented as a result of internal conflict.

 Many of today's international interventions undertaken in the name of nation-building devote most of their resources to building state institutions and have relatively little focus on nation-building in the broader, literal sense. The emphasis is more about regime change or democratisation, as in Afghanistan or Iraq, or the reconstruction of states that have collapsed or been seriously weakened as a result of internal conflict, as in the cases of Timor-Leste or Solomon Islands.

Although they refer to different processes, it is argued here state-building and nation-building are integrally related as twin aspects of modern nation-states. The absence of a shared identity makes it hard to fashion the cohesive national community needed for the development of an effective and durable state. The goal of nation-building in the broader sense is to unify the national community within the institutional framework of the modern state, with the objective of social and political stability.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CONTEXT

The neglect of the long and diverse history of nation-building and the critical importance of local context, including culture and politics, is one of the most significant limitations of prevailing conceptions and practices of international nation-building. In addition, the securitised character of much of today's policy discourse has detracted from the need to formulate a more development-oriented understanding of nation-building. Rather than trying to impose change by coercive means, development policy aims to shape conditions in recipient countries on a partnership basis between external and local actors using a wide range of civil and structural instruments. In doing so, it presupposes a local demand for this co-shaping. The development approach also acknowledges the practical limitations of external interventions in nation-building - a complex and context-sensitive process. The priority is to identify the local dynamics of nation-building in a particular country and provide carefully targeted support.

Nations, like states, do not exist naturally - they need to be built, and history teaches that they are rarely built by external means alone. Nation-building does not start with the end of violent conflict or major social upheaval. Nor is it a process confined to so-called developing countries. On the contrary, it is an ongoing process in all countries aimed at establishing and maintaining an integrated national society based on broadly conceived shared values and goals. A sense of shared identity helps overcome parochial divisions that might otherwise lead to disharmony and conflict. It equates with a growing level of social cohesion and is, in turn, both a source and a reflection of the growth of civil society. The workings of many institutions of the modern state rely on the willingness of individuals to identify with - and be able to participate as members of - a common political community. This is essential if states are to be held accountable effectively by the citizens they exist to serve. The construction and reproduction of national identity remains a live, continuous and, often, contested issue in most nation-states.

NATION-BUILDING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Looking back at the 19th and 20th centuries indicates the principal types of nation-building with the most lasting impact on the modern world have been nationalism and colonialism. Some analysts have also proposed the post-WWII reconstruction of Germany and Japan as examples of successful international nation-making. However, both countries had lengthy and powerful traditions of statehood and nationalism pre-dating the war. They were already ethnic and cultural communities, as well as political states, and external intervention was essentially about their physical reconstruction and re-legitimation as democratic states.

Nationalism
Although unwise to generalise given the wide variations across time and space, building the modern nation-state in Europe was very different to the more recent experience in much of the so-called developing world. In the former case, these processes often took place over centuries rather than years, were not the outcome of well-intentioned international interventions, and frequently entailed extensive conflict as the forces of centralisation confronted and overcame rival sources of power at local and regional levels. In addition, nationalism, constructed around the symbols and mythology of shared identity and community, was a major force in the development of many early European states.

Nationalism, in this broad sense, often preceded the establishment of states. For example, it contributed to the unification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871, as well as to the break-up of Austria-Hungary in 1918. There were, of course, also many other factors involved. While political leadership was a critical factor, so too were changes in technology and economic production, as well as matters of communication, culture, and civil society. Nation-building was most successful where governments were relatively capable, where powerful states made room for new entrants, and where populations were not deeply divided. An example would be Germany, which had an effective government and was very successful in forging a strong sense of shared identity and community. Yugoslavia, on the other hand, was ultimately unsuccessful, as demonstrated by its disintegration in the post-Cold war period.

Colonialism and the Creation of 'States without Nations'
While the experience of a select few European powers continues to shape much Western thinking about the modern nation-state, state-building and nation-building in other parts of the world have followed a very different trajectory. Many of today's developing states have their origins in the era of colonial expansion by major European powers during the 18th, 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. In annexing large swathes of territory around the world, colonial powers created arbitrary borders and imposed external systems of governance with little, if any, regard to their fit with indigenous polities and social forms.

Colonial states were external creations with an inherently non-democratic character. They were organised primarily to promote the political and economic interests of distant metropolitan powers rather than advance the interests of local peoples. Building elaborate state structures and social infrastructure often did not take place until very late in many colonial projects. Prior to the accelerated institutional modernisation that typically preceded independence, local participation in formal political processes was often limited and any hint of emerging nationalism was viewed as a threat to the maintenance of colonial order. Where nationalist movements arose, they were often anti-colonial in character, provoked by opposition to external intervention rather than its deliberate outcome. In other places, the absence of strong independence movements perpetuated high levels of existing diversity and division.

Many former colonies were ill-prepared for the challenges of independent statehood that began to arrive in the second half of the 20th century. This was particularly so among Australia's Melanesian neighbours in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in the Southwest Pacific. In these countries the timing of independence was almost as abrupt and unilateral as the original acts of colonial annexation a century before. Modern state institutions only began to be assembled well after WWII. As a consequence, they inevitably had shallow foundations in the local environments they were grafted on to.

This lack of embeddedness was manifested not only in the limited capabilities of post-colonial states, but also in the low levels of legitimacy accorded them by many of their own citizens. Artificial colonial borders were retained, formal economies and infrastructure remained under-developed, and the human resources needed to operate a complex bureaucratic state were in scarce supply. In fragmented and tribalised societies, such as those in Melanesia and sub-Saharan Africa, there was little sense of a shared political community capable of uniting disparate local groups. Living predominantly in rural communities, bonds of kinship, shared language and ties to ancestral land, along with Christianity, were more likely to constitute the basis for individual identities and allegiances, than abstract notions of 'citizenship' or membership of the modern state. Localism prevailed over nationalism in virtually every sphere of social, economic, and political life. Nationalism - such as it was - was largely confined to the small urban elite.

In such unpromising settings, independence created *states without nations*. The establishment of the state preceded that of nation in much of the colonial and post-colonial world. It is this combination of state fragility and lack of nation borne of their particular histories and pluralistic social environments that underlies many of the challenges facing these countries today. Not only were many new states weak in an institutional sense, they were also incomplete, with a limited presence in parts of their territories, and incapable of delivering basic services to all eligible citizens. State-building and nation-building have therefore had to be pursued simultaneously, and have often worked against each other in practice. This has contributed to crises of legitimacy and the weakening of state institutions in the post-independence period. The demise of colonialism was accompanied by the revival of ethnic and regional divisions in many places. Political decentralisation was viewed by newly independent governments as an important instrument for promoting political participation and national unity in the face of multiple pressures for local autonomy.

NATION-BUILDING FROM A DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE
The object of 'nation-building' from a development perspective comprises three related elements:

1. The development of an effectively functioning state that is accorded legitimacy by the bulk of its citizens. Central to this are the functions of securing a monopoly of force, guaranteeing security for the population and neighbouring countries, the rule of law, and the provision of essential public goods. These are fundamental attributes of statehood and - although not the full story - constitute a necessary foundation for 'nation-building'.

2. Nation-building also requires a physical, social and communications infrastructure that is shared by the entire civil society. These assets must be accessible for all groups of the population and be used by them for transactions and communication. It is difficult to build a sense of nation in a country containing regions or areas whose inhabitants are effectively cut-off from the rest of the population.

3. Nation-building further presupposes a socio-cultural structuring and integration process leading to shared characteristics of identity, values and goals. It is not so much the homogeneity of these characteristics that is crucial, rather it is the acceptance and toleration of heterogeneity and the facilitation of inclusion. The relevant phrase used in Papua New Guinea is "unity in diversity" and this captures the essence of nation-building in its literal sense.

'Nation-building' cannot be accomplished from the top-down but requires the active participation of ordinary citizens in the shaping of a common political will. Citizens must provide the necessary legitimacy to the new state. Commitment to the common good and a shared community are essential because collective decision-making often entails imposing sacrifices for the common good (e.g. to protect the environment for future generations). If these sacri-

fices are not backed up by shared values and bonds - the key elements of community - they will not be treated as legitimate and will not be effectively achieved, or will have to be brought about through force. Where individual identities and allegiances are founded primarily on membership of ethnic and other sub-national groups, these can weaken or undermine the sense of membership of a larger political community.

Loyalties to ethnic group, tribe or clan are deeply embedded in some countries and continue to be more important than member-ship of the modern nation-state. Where states have never func-tioned properly or have ceased to do so, the appeal of sub-national identities is likely to persist or even be strengthened and, in the process, hinder efforts to build a sense of national community.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Nation-building is an ongoing and context-specific task that does not fit easily into pre-determined analytical frameworks or artifi-cial timeframes. To be sustainable, it needs to be locally owned and driven. External assistance can, at best, facilitate local proc-esses aimed at integrating different peoples and regions. The 'do no harm' principle of development assistance translates into the avoidance of initiatives that perpetuate or accentuate divisions within local populations, and the active pursuit of policies that promote national integration.

There is no blueprint for successful nation-building. A good place to start is the identification of appropriate 'stepping stones to national consciousness', given the particular historical and social circumstances of the country in question. In Solomon Islands, some observers have identified these 'stepping stones' as the education system; Pijin, the *lingua franca* of the archipel-ago; and the popular culture slowly spreading from the urban centres. Education, language and communications policies are critical instruments of nation-building in every country. The first is a crucial vehicle for instilling civic values and sense of shared community in young minds. The second enables citizens of the same country to communicate with each other, while the third is necessary to bridge the physical and social distance that often separates and isolates people in large and geographically frag-mented countries. The importance of radio broadcasting in com-municating national affairs cannot be underestimated, particu-larly in countries with predominantly rural populations and low levels of literacy. Modern technology, such as mobile phones and email have contributed to nation-building in countries with the necessary infrastructure. Cultural institutions, such as Vanu-atu's National Cultural Centre, and policies that help record and promote 'traditional' (e.g. pre-state/pre-nation) cultures can also make an important contribution to the nurturing of national iden-tity.

Local writers and artists help produce the narratives of nation that help generate shared consciousness. Among the most dy-namic milieus for creatively fusing different cultural influences into distinct national forms are the popular and youth cultures that spring up in multi-cultural urban settings. Sporting events, including international competition, are a potent catalyst for shared identity in countries throughout the world. One need only think of the remarkable scenes of national rejoicing on the war-torn streets of Baghdad following the victory of the Iraqi soccer team in the recent Asian Cup. In the Pacific, events such as the South Pacific Games and the South Pacific Festival of Arts pro-vide important opportunities for national pride. A recent report on PNG suggests more Australian support for rugby league at community and national levels, and argues that the participation of PNG teams in Australia's National Rugby League competi-tion – if broadcast throughout PNG – might do more to build PNG's sense of national identity than anything else we could do.

NGOs and other civil society organizations can play a criti-cal role in developing the social and political capacities of the bulk of the population. This would assist in increasing the effectiveness of the population in influencing govern-ance institutions and making the latter more responsive to local needs and aspirations. Churches are a major compo-nent of civil society throughout the Pacific and, as such, constitute an important potential instrument of nation-building. They can also be divisive under certain circum-stances, as where people are divided by religious or de-nominational differences. Supporting civil society and na-tional integration can include measures that increase access to information, promote freedom of expression, develop associations to promote the voices and interests of marginal groups, and overcome barriers against political inclusion.

Enhancing political participation is another vital condition for building national community. Political participation can be enhanced in various ways. It can be facilitated structur-ally by decentralisation aimed at increasing access to the state at the most local levels, while making it more respon-sive to grassroots needs. The appeal of this approach is obvious in countries where state resources remain concen-trated in urban areas, controlled by a small elite, and remote from the bulk of the rural population.

Enabling ordinary citizens to participate in and influence decision-making processes, especially at local levels, is a key aspect of both nation-building and current conceptions of good governance. Increased political participation should improve the efficiency of public services, render govern-ment more accountable, and deepen democracy – comple-menting representative forms with more participatory forms of democracy.

This briefing note was written by Sinclair Dinnen.

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