Setting ourselves up for success: insights and perspectives for policy-makers to give traditional authorities a greater role in stabilizing the Sahel

SUMMARY

Insights from research in Libya, Mali and Niger on the role of traditional authorities in stabilising the complex context in the Sahel can be made practical in a policy-arena via 'dedication to the profession' – the impact achieved via the individual actions and decisions of the policy-makers involved. We do not call for a 'system innovation' or a '180', but for incremental adjustment fuelled by the reflections and follow-up actions of the involved professionals. What does it mean to be a policy-maker and what does this mean for individual actions? This policy-brief is an open invitation to join us in looking for informed divergence of existing routes in policy-making through a combination of five perspectives: breaking complexity down – stacking communication – gathering creativity – seeking consensus – commitment to action.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief is based on research[1] conducted in Libya, Mali and Niger aimed at understanding how to incorporate the role of (legitimate) traditional authorities in (inter) national interventions to increase security and rule of law.

The brief is meant to provide guidance in terms of practical recommendations for policy-makers and implementers to advance "new approaches, which understand peacebuilding, at least in its early phases, as having more to do with strengthening local domains of governance than trying to re-establish strong central authority."[2] Traditional authorities have historically played a (legitimate) role in state power in the border regions in Libya, Mali and Niger, where the formal state is absent or has limited power. At the same time, there is no informed path to indicate to what extent traditional authorities can play a role next to institutionalised sovereign power/state models. In reality there is not necessarily agreement, in the various countries or among international players, on any future role for this stakeholder in the region. We experienced that the impact sought by policy-makers in areas of fragile or limited statehood – i.e. empowerment of local leaders, improvement of stability and increasing safety – will benefit once the role of traditional authorities is clarified and activated.[3] Apart from understanding what role authorities play and to what extent this is important for future interventions, we, therefore, looked for ideas to guide policy-makers: what can they actually do to advance new approaches?

From our experience, we know attention for the human factor, cooperation and action-oriented initiatives are key elements for successful interventions[4]. To a certain extent this requires informed divergence of existing routes of policy-making. We propose to test this via small changes with policy-makers and implementers who dare to:

• Contextualise conceptual knowledge with partners;
• Operationalise inclusiveness; and
• Play an active role in getting from intentions to actions.

CONTEXT, ISSUES, EXAMPLES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the border regions of Libya, Mali and Niger, a continuous process of the renegotiation of local governance structures within and across different ethnicities, as well as with central state structures, takes place at critical junctures in time. Without taking prevailing intra- and inter-ethnic tensions, as well as ethnicity-informed governance legacies into account, external interventions risk upsetting delicate balances that exist. To prevent this, new routes are needed for such interventions that elevate traditional authorities to the status of critical stakeholders that lead them. Three findings from our research provide direction.

Contextualize conceptual knowledge – with partners

[1] The research project 'The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya' was conducted with financial support from NWO-WOTRO – commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and developed in close collaboration with the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (SRoL-ARF6).

[2] United Nations, The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture, June 29, 2015, p. 16.

[3] See Molenaar, F. et al. 2019. The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya. CRU Report. The Hague: Clingendael.
https://www.clingendael.org/publication/legitimacy-traditional-authorities-mali-niger-and-libya

[4] See www.bureauensemble.com for practical experiences.

Ample knowledge is available on the Sahel, regarding (re)-building the state, stabilization and the role of stakeholders in fragile or conflict-affected settings. This provides a knowledge base to inform the outline of policy development. Informing more detailed policy interventions thereafter has to be based on additional questions that always come up, especially in fragile and constantly changing context. Knowledge generation is, therefore, a crucial part in policy planning and programme delivery in those settings. And it has to be undertaken jointly with local researchers and sources. What is known to policy-makers and implementers is often conceptual knowledge. Yet such knowledge must be contextualised and it is possible to do so in close cooperation with local partners. In Libya, Mali and Niger we designed the research questions with local researchers. They provided invaluable details and drew our attention to local customs, values and conditions. They pointed to critical local differences between minorities and regions, as well as prevailing power dynamics.

Example locally informed insight

In Mali, the perceived relations between traditional authorities and state representatives vary according to the degree of urbanization of the community. Urban settings allow for more direct contact between state representatives and traditional authorities. In addition, urban settings generally provide a higher sense of security – making it less risky for traditional authorities to interact with state representatives.[5]

Access to answers relevant for policy development comes through partnerships with local communities and researchers. Strengthening their position and capacities should be an integral part of policy interventions - not as a one-of-event, but on a continuous basis.

In Niger, it became clear that the issue of, for example, legitimacy is not straightforward because legitimacy derives from a dynamic context, at the moment largely prompted by the politics of democratisation. This may mean that what we have observed is very much a situation in flux or a moment of transition, one

[5] See Molenaar, F. et al. 2019. The Status Quo Defied:

TRIPOLI

LYBIA

MALI

NIGER

BAMAKO

NIAMEY
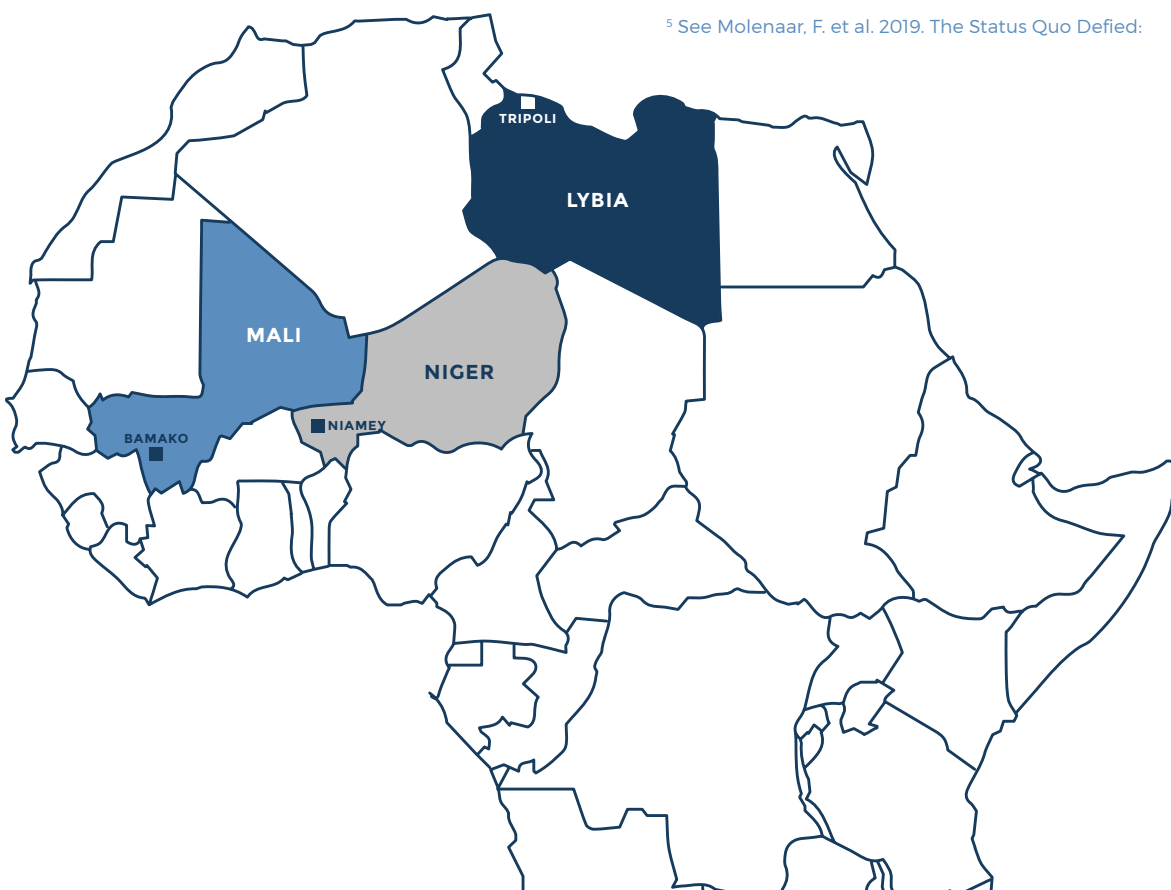
that is moving people from old-style chieftaincy toward a new (though not totally different) chieftaincy system. In such a moment, the parameters of legitimacy themselves are unstable, with old ones weakening, and new ones not yet fully established.[6] Generating this insight, understanding it and being able to act upon it, requires continuous searching: posing questions and jointly understanding them in multi-cultural and disciplinary teams.

Explore what is further needed together with local partners as most answers are readily available with them.
Search, understand and question in recurrent cycles in this fluid, dynamic context.

Operationalise inclusiveness

At the national level in Libya, Mali, and Niger, the position of traditional authorities in the functioning of the state is debated or even questioned, and has not yet led to an agreed-upon outlook for their role in (stabilizing) society. For most traditional authorities, the national state, let alone the international community of policy-makers, is a distant and yet omnipresent force. Their modi operandi differ so strongly that direct communication and joint action often seems a bridge too far.

In such a context it can be expected that including all players in strategizing or implementation is difficult. But it is a precondition for creating long-term and inclusive development. In principle, this is not contested, but what is preached is not practised. Several initial insights were gained during the research that can help stimulate further operationalization:

(1) Focus on dedication Whether national or international stakeholders have a formal or

informal position, their dedication to contribute to development makes the difference. This has to be measured not only by their intentions but even more so by their actions. Whatever their position or initial scepticism, continued engagement with the topics at hand and the willingness to remain involved matter.

> Libyan representatives from around the country are willing to travel 12 hours by check-point dotted roads to attend a meeting.
> The chairman of the 'Association Municipal de Mali' brought up during a meeting, 'even while traditional authorities in the North of Mali have not been invited to take part in the peace agreement and many do favour Azawad[7], they remain willing to talk and engage'. After such a frank statement, not inviting them for future negotiations would be an afront.

(2) Agree on rules for dialogue Once all are gathered around the table, we must next address 'in what way' participants sit. What do we mean exactly when we express ourselves, do we understand each other? In Niger, we verified how people perceived the security situation and status quo in the country. Even between Nigeriens, agreeing on what seems straight forward requires posing questions and listening closely before conclusion on definitions and situational analysis can be attempted. Are we open about our contribution? Do we commit ourselves and if so, to what exactly? In Libya merely expressing oneself with Libyans from different regions in the room requires the building of trust beforehand.

These sorts of questions cannot be answered up-front. They are part of the dialogue between stakeholders and will have to be repeatedly

[6] See Molenaar, F. et al. 2019. The Status Quo Defied:

asked during a process as answers will improve as confidence grows.

Effectively imposing western approaches hampers other participants to bring their unique qualities to the table. In Niamey for example, a meeting took placed chaired by the deputy director of the 'Haute Authorité a la Consilidation de la Paix'. At the start, with a small nod of his head, he let one of his staff know all tablets had to be shut down. The officer obliged instantly and a lively, engaged discussion between all participants took place. The chairmen's request for undivided attention for the people in the room is a valuable asset; yet non-Nigeriens would not necessarily have followed suit, thereby blocking potential dialogue.

(3) Connect the different 'hemispheres'
Within and between countries different 'hemispheres' exist and they require a connection. If you work from a donor perspective you also need to remain in touch with stakeholders operating from a national recipient perspective or traditional authority viewpoint; and the other way around. From all sides people will be involved and normally they bring distinct skills and talents with them. What remains is a serious challenge to synchronise the efforts taken on all sides.

Aligning international donors and getting a budget approved can be an extremely demanding and important task for a policy officer working at a ministry. But what does it mean for a young man living in Ghat? The same question arises when arranging a workshop for fifteen activists in Niamey. What does it mean ifor the member of parliament in Brussels?

Value is created in different hemispheres and understanding the rationality and oddities in different ways is a necessity for reaching a successful combination. In this respect, timely reporting on budget and results for a specific

project is just as relevant as accepting the long negotiations between Libyan tribes. Working with impact in Mali requires just as much international funding and policies, as men and women running projects and delivering results in Ménaka. Once people with the ability to operate – or at least have an understanding of 'the other side' manage to bridge the differences, flow is created in projects or activities. Impact thus is a result of an optimised blending of hemispheres.

Operationalise inclusiveness through engaging all stakeholders based on their intentions and actions, ensure the rules of dialogue are jointly agreed and focus on connecting the different 'hemispheres'.

From intentions to involvement in action

Once a policy is developed and stakeholders are involved, the playing field is often left to 'implementing organisations'. The involvement of diplomats and policy officers is then reduced to a yearly meeting or an e-mailed reminder for interim-reports. Yet when policy interventions are developed along the way to respond to the changing situation on the ground, and a diverse group of stakeholders need to remain committed, programme design and implementation become decisive for success. A lasting and active involvement by policy-makers is key in these circumstances. One could even say that (just) bureaucratic monitoring is a blockade to impact in countries like Libya, Mali and Niger.

Implementation is traditionally seen as a separate process, ruled by pre-approved log frames, planning and budgets. The implementation, from the design to its activities, must respond to a changing context, and an adaptive approach is preferred.

This, however, requires the active involvement of all stakeholders (both at national and international level) at recurring moments. This way it becomes possible to integrate new insights, agree on their meaning, reflect on next steps, and move forward. This is a trial and error approach that seeks a balance between intentions and reality on the ground.

For policy developers, the process of 'adaptive programming' has far-reaching consequences. They have a new role to play as partner in a credible coalition. This requires ample time for dialogue over the years. Moreover, it requires clear and consistent ambitions shared with local stakeholders and translated into support for locally identified and sustainable initiatives. Questions that emerge about changes in the context, roles of stakeholders or results policy-makers maypose as partner in a process.

In fact, the concept of adaptive programming in some ways challenges the habits and routines within the current dominant paradigm for policymaking, in which policy officers unfamiliar with the stakeholders in a country are focused on managing multiple programmes from a distance. Unease or resistance can be anticipated at the start. Preparing for more impact in working with traditional authorities, therefore, begins with reflection on and adapting the role of policy-makers.

More impact can be obtained by innovating the traditional roles of policy-makers towards greater co-creation and involvement in programme implementation.

Perspective for action

How to make the above-mentioned insights practical in a policy-arena? We feel that much can be achieved via 'dedication to the profession' – the impact achieved via the individual

actions and decisions of the policy-makers involved (whether active in the local or in the international arena). This policy brief does not call for a 'system innovation' or a '180', but for incremental adjustment fuelled by the reflections and follow-up actions of the involved professionals. What does it mean to be a policy-maker and what does this mean for individual actions? Looking for 'informed divergence of existing routes' in policy-making can happen through a combination of five working principles.[8]

I. Breaking down complexity For an outsider operating in Mali, Niger or Libya, getting a good understanding of local power dynamics is a continuous challenge (one that insiders may also experience) Powers shift and (violent) incidents can fundamentally disrupt any projected development path. How do policy-makers in the international community observe this? Do the bureaucratic eye for detail and the academic surge for a complete picture remain dominant? Or can we enrich this paradigm and learn to embrace the dynamics and maybe even learn to appreciate deviances? The complexity in the three countries studied calls for action based on existing insights and the will to remain involved to explore the road ahead together.

II. Stacking communication We are dealing with local or central powers who run the country. These authorities, first of all, seek acknowledgement that they are recognized as such. Bringing the whole system into the room might not be the most efficient route, but might be more effective in the longer run. Interacting with fluid power dynamics is a continuous process of mutual influencing. In these countries the oral tradition of dialogue

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[8] Those perspectives are developed based on the criteria introduced by Duke and Geurts in Policy Games for strategic management, Dutch Univeristy Press 2004 and ideas developed by Vermaak as described in for example Enjoying tough issues, Kluwer 2009.

has much more impact than writing memoranda or any policy statement. A dialogue is not a 'transaction' but a relation. Building and maintaining trust calls for the same dedication (or endurance) as mentioned before. The key competencies here for policy-makers are: listen and learn from what local players express, be resilient in the consecutive dialogue, and be clear and consistent when it comes to the 'why' of your involvement. Never hide your intentions – jargon or a polite reply will lead to a debunk.

III. Gathering creativity In the current dynamics in fragile contexts, small-scale experiments will do better than a large-scale rollout. Local communities can take stronger ownership of initiatives with a clear scope. Besides, drawing up some grand design for stability in the region is simply impossible. We do and learn in an endless cycle. Interacting with – and building – more or less stable local partnerships, and encouraging these to take initiatives, calls for a cooperative culture. This goes beyond traditional 'capacity building' as we know it. It requires constructing teams that operate in safe learning environments, counting on each other in terms of commitment (personal and in resources), aligning our ambitions (both personal and institutional) and remaining focused on the impact of our work.

Can these be the leading principles for us while interacting with other policy-makers or (local) stakeholders in the arena? Checking in on these ideas every now and then – individually or as a group – is a strong invitation to reflect and a key input on professional growth.

IV. Seeking consensus Let small-scale actions in countries like Mali, Libya or Niger be a flywheel for the birth of more or less stable combinations of local players. Building (and sponsoring) crucial coalitions in this sense is a meaningful contribution to stability in the region. Not as a one-time intervention, but more as a continuous and flexible approach (iterative process of action planning) that has a strong impact in settings just like these. Bring together relevant players (don't be too strict in the selection from the start) and encourage them to get involved in some kind of action (in line with the objective). The policymaker in this setting is more someone who connects than someone who convinces. Policy-makers or their forward operators serve as 'enablers'.

V. Commit to action A candid assessment of the outcome of this series of pilots should give a clear sight on effective actions, just as much as on coalitions that deliver. Introducing these findings to stakeholders within the local authorities will reinforce policies that work (and terminate those that do not). Successful action feeds the coalition that carries it forward as well. Maintaining close ties with these delivering coalitions is a clear investment in building stability in the region. As mentioned, "Whether national or international stakeholders have a formal or informal position, their dedication makes the difference. This has to be measured not only by their intentions but even more in their actions."

Final step

These working principles can be operationalised in a methodology. In the coming years, this will be tested and implemented by Bureau Ensemble and the Conflict and Research Unit of Institute Clingendael. This will only be possible if policy-makers dare to get involved. Anyone interested to experience what this may mean for their own professionalism and impact on their work in development in fragile contexts is invited to contact us to explore new ways of working in practice.

Powerful combinations for delicate situations

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