

› Where there is violence and fragility, **local government is often the only form of government that people notice**. Actions impossible at the national or regional level may be possible at the local level.

› **State building from the bottom up** takes attention to local government performance, legitimacy, and to relationships with civil society. It needs to connect with attention to new constitutions and laws.

› Local government services provide good technical themes to engage on. But working on technical themes still **requires conflict sensitivity and attention to inclusiveness**.

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* Local government in violent and fragile areas

Introduction

Local governments in violent and fragile areas are in the frontline in multiple ways. They try to keep services going as best as they can. They are often the first and only port of call for people in trouble. They may have to deal with their own citizens but also with large groups of displaced people. This policy brief is about VNG International's perspective on such situations, and our approach in such areas.

Local government in violent and fragile areas

According to the OECD, 'fragile states [...] have weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lack the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society'. What does this mean at the local level? Many local governments try to keep service delivery going, to connect with local civil society organisations, and to reduce tensions where they can. Sometimes they issue early warning signals. Others do not have the willingness or the legitimacy to play such constructive roles.

It is at the local level that people experience what the state, local governments, armed movements, civil society, customary leaders and international actors do... or fail to do. Local governance emerges in the interplay of these actors in hybrid governance. Public enmity often goes hand in hand with covert cooperation.

Local government is always under stress where violence may flare up. Local conflicts (for instance about land) feed on conflicts at the national or regional level (for instance about who runs the government) and the other way around, in predictable and unpredictable ways.

There are at least three challenges in such situations:

- 1 The challenge to isolate local conflict dynamics from broader ones
- 2 The challenge to make local actors adopt appropriate roles, with legitimacy based on performance and inclusiveness
- 3 The challenge to connect with a process in which relationships between levels of government are redrafted

VNG International calls these processes taken together state building from the bottom up.

Our approach

VNG International has since long been active in violent and fragile areas, in which local governments deal with war, crime, urban gangs, riots and political instability. The map presents the areas of recent activity. We also engage in countries which are in the process of reconstruction, and countries where the question is how to create a transition out of a revolution, where local government is emergent or transitional.

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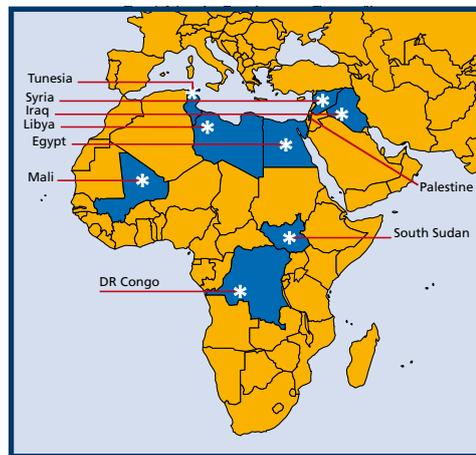


DO NO HARM

The principle of Do No Harm is central in our approach, as is working on the basis of the demands of local governments and ministries responsible for the local government sector. VNG International, the agency for international cooperation of the Dutch local governments, is itself part of the local government sector.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Doing no harm requires conflict sensitivity. Local government services are often proposed as a technical, politically neutral theme. This is only partly true – conflict sensitivity is always needed. The question of who gets services is a potential trigger of instability.



We work with a mix of quick wins combined with coaching-mentoring and technical assistance in a longer-term commitment. In this longer-term relationship, we raise issues of inclusiveness of service delivery. We pay specific attention to young and female councillors, in view of inclusiveness and conflict sensitivity.

COLLEAGUE-TO-COLLEAGUE

We work preferably with colleagues (mayors, councillors and staff) from foreign countries and from within the country in a community of practice. They help in defining appropriate roles and in capacity building. Their presence in dialogue tends to make people play more according to the rules of democratic accountability and human rights. Such effects should not be overstated – but small improvements may be visible and significant.

Cross-border linkages are a special way in which local governments may help each other. If local governments in a neighbouring country function better, there is much to be gained with technical assistance, coaching-mentoring, good examples of working with civil society, or even pooling facilities. Also, if the circumstances are right, we involve local governments in dialogue and mediation across borders.

DISPLACEMENT

Situations with large groups of displaced people and correspondingly large flows of aid pose their own class of challenges. Part of this relates to dealing with groups who are not citizens, but who nevertheless have rights, require services and organise their own local governance. Local governments in this situation need to get a grip on the development of the territory, and on operation and maintenance of municipal infrastructure put in place by international aid organisations.

Our approach here is to help local governments with spatial planning, with services planning for people and businesses, and to combine attention to refugee camps with attention to their surrounding areas.

RESTORING TRUST

Part of VNG International's approach is to monitor citizens' trust in and performance of local government in its connection with the police and justice system, then to help improve the conditions for such performance. Improvements can be considerable when local governments, local branches of the police and justice institutions and local civil society work in support of their respective roles, with a shared understanding of them. In the long run, enhanced performance and trust may reinforce each other, diminishing the urge to take the law into one's own hands.