

CRISIS MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS, LESS IS MORE

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This Working Paper is a contribution to the conversations on the relevance of crisis management policies and practices as they have been constructed and applied in conflict-ridden fragile states. Current crisis management discourse is situated within a larger framework of the state-building agenda that was dominant in the post-9/11 context and had its heyday in Afghanistan. The paper seeks to answer questions about the shifts in the operational environment, agency, ownership, and expectation management of interventions.

Policies and practices need to be refocused and recalibrated to make them better suited to future engagements. To be effective, future crisis management operations should be agile, small scale, and composed of teams that undertake limited and clearly defined tasks. The motto here is ‘the smaller and less intrusive the better’. Future crisis management should not be seen as a project or a mission, but rather as an attempt to support partners in building a working ecosystem in which problems are resolved through cooperation. Such an approach is not about building institutions, but rather about taking steps that allow the crisis management partners to face shocks and withstand them.



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INTRODUCTION

The 20-year-long war in Afghanistan ended in defeat for the US-led intervention in the country. The Kabul regime that had been propped up for two decades collapsed like a castle built on sand. Billions upon billions of dollars spent on attempts at state-building did not achieve the lofty goal of stabilizing the country. Ever since August 2021, many reports and studies examining the war efforts and state-building in Afghanistan have been commissioned by the governments and parliaments of the countries involved in the intervention. The reports and studies raise the critical question of why the costly intervention ended in such failure. In addition to this, much soul-searching has been done by individuals involved in the war in Afghanistan, be they diplomats, soldiers, civilian crisis management experts, humanitarian and aid workers, and so on.¹

The outcome of the intervention raised vexing questions, to which there are no easy answers. How is it possible that after 20 years, the only tangible result is that a ragtag Taliban guerrilla army managed to outmanoeuvre the strongest and most formidable military force in modern history? What are the reasons why the democratically elected government in Kabul, supported by foreign advisors and experts, collapsed so quickly in the final days of summer 2021? Was the 20-year intervention really worth the effort? What could have been done differently? Will we see similar interventions in other parts of the world in the coming years?

The debacle in Afghanistan provides a vignette of the successes and failures of crisis management of the largest intervention in recent history. However, there are wider lessons to be learned beyond Afghanistan when engaging with conflict-ridden fragile states. This Working Paper builds on a substantial critique of the liberal peace paradigm, taking the discussion all the way to the policy level, with a critical look at the relevance of crisis management policies and

practices as they have been constructed and applied in conflict-ridden fragile states in the recent past. Crisis management is seen here to encompass both civilian and military aspects. The paper poses questions of whether there is a need to further refocus and recalibrate crisis management projects to make them better suited to future engagements, although it is doubtful whether there is much appetite for Afghanistan-like interventions in the near and medium term. Scaling down peace and crisis management operations may well be inevitable for numerous reasons, but simply scaling down without a guiding idea would only increase the risks and inefficiency.²

The problem is tackled in three ways. Firstly, the current crisis management discourse needs to be situated within a larger framework on the state-building agenda that was so dominant in the post-9/11 context and had its heyday in Afghanistan. This is linked to the fragile states and aid policies debate, as the argument here is that crisis management policies and practices are a subset of the international engagement with the fragile state phenomenon. Debates around state-building and crisis management tend to occur in their own respective silos. The current paper is one of very few attempts to look at both paradigms from a holistic viewpoint with the aim of cross-fertilizing and cross-learning from both perspectives.

Secondly, questions are posed about how crisis management interventions are affected by shifts in the operational environment. Issues revolving around agency and ownership need to be factored into the debate. In addition, there is a need to examine the expectations regarding the outcome of crisis management interventions, as they are directly linked to the relevance of the interventions.

Finally, alternative ways of thinking about crisis management are explored and ideas for further research are offered. The Working Paper examines the subject matter at both international and national levels,

1 See e.g., Whitlock 2021.

2 For a critical look at current scaling down, see Karlsrud 2019.

with a particular focus on Finnish experiences.³ Reflections on a variety of settings will be intertwined with observations about NATO- and/or EU-led missions in a number of far-flung fragile contexts.

It should be stressed that the focus of the argument is on crisis management operations related to intra-state conflicts in fragile contexts. For example, the current state-on-state war in Ukraine is different, as it requires a certain level of outside assistance. Moreover, the concept of state fragility does not apply to Ukraine to the same extent that it does in the case of Afghanistan or Iraq.⁴ The authors of this paper draw extensively on their own experiences in developing crisis management policies and practices, both at the theoretical and field levels in fragile contexts. The intended audience of the paper is the research community, policymakers and practitioners alike.

1. FRAGILE STATES AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE STATE-BUILDING AGENDA

Before reflecting on the questions posed in the Introduction, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan has to be situated within the paradigm of the state-building agenda, which was a dominant paradigm in the foreign aid and crisis management debates of the post-9/11 era. The state-building agenda emerged as a part of the fragile states discourse that was the driving force behind many foreign policy decisions of the time.⁵ A prelude to this was a debate originating in conflict studies, which argued that the nature of conflicts had changed dramatically in the 1990s and 2000s.⁶ With the end of the Cold War, the prevalence and probability of state-on-state conflict subsided. Civil wars with indirect external involvement and intra-state violence became more typical than inter-state wars.⁷ The role of armed non-state actors challenging the authority of elected governments became ever more acute.⁸

Whether the conflicts were motivated by state capture by greedy and corrupt elites or by the grievances

of marginalized groups, it became clear that violent conflicts tended to occur in states that were fragile. There was a consensus among donor countries that fragile states were those that were unable to fulfil the most important functions of the state: territorial control, safety and security, capacity to manage public resources, delivery of basic services and the ability to protect and support vulnerable groups.⁹ Supporting state-building in fragile states posed a different set of questions compared to more stable development contexts where different instruments, such as budget support and policy dialogues, could be conducted on various government reform agendas. Such instruments were somewhat out of place in fragile situations, where the very existence of the state was violently contested by armed groups.

The changing nature of violent conflicts and the phenomenon of fragile states posed serious challenges to the international community in terms of policy responses.¹⁰ It is worth noting that from the onset ‘the international community’ essentially referred to OECD countries struggling with the challenge; it took some time before the concept of fragile states started to slowly permeate some non-OECD countries and institutions, such as the African Union and regional development banks. The OECD Development Assistance Committee’s document *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations* from April 2007 set the framework for understanding comprehensive crisis management and peacebuilding in fragile states.¹¹ The thinking at the time underlined that the legitimacy and accountability of states form the foundations for state-building, which should be achieved through democratic governance, human rights, and civil society engagement. Legislative changes are also crucial in this process. The legitimacy of the state was to be linked with the need to strengthen the capacity of states to fulfil their core functions, including

3 The writers are grateful to Katariina Mustasilta, Tyyne Karjalainen, Oskari Eronen and Katja Creutz for valuable comments that greatly helped to focus the arguments in the text. The authors nonetheless remain solely responsible for the arguments presented.

4 However, it is interesting to note that on the civilian side of crisis management, the EU mission EUAM Ukraine is actually returning to the pre-invasion mode of operation with a focus on civilian security sector reform, much the same way as in Iraq or Afghanistan.

5 Ruohomäki, O. 2012.

6 Collier and Hoeffler 2004.

7 Collier et al. 2003.

8 See e.g., Mustasilta, Ruohomäki and Salo 2022.

9 DFID 2005. One of the authors of this paper attended a senior-level forum on development effectiveness in fragile states at Lancaster House in London on 13 and 14 January 2005. The forum marked the beginning of the use of the fragile states concept in donor discourse. See Nay 2014 for a critique of the concept.

10 A number of indexes which measure and list countries as fragile have emerged. These include the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index, the OECD Report on State Fragility, and others. There was and continues to be a clear correlation between the level of a country’s development and fragility. In other words, the more developed the country was and is, the less fragile it is and vice versa. Other attributes such as the level of corruption and the lack of civil rights tended to correlate with the country’s level of fragility. It also became apparent that countries that experienced violence and civil strife tended to be more fragile than countries that were governed by a democratically elected government and in which the population enjoyed and exercised civil and political rights. Essentially, the different indexes listed and ranked countries from the most stable to the most fragile, with the Nordic countries featuring as the most stable, and countries experiencing violent conflict and protracted war such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen featuring as the most fragile.

11 OECD 2007.

the provision of security and justice, basic services, revenue collection and employment generation.

The implementation of the state-building agenda was accompanied by technical assistance packages in different sectors ranging from security to basic service provision. The technical assistance packages were essentially composed of experts whose tasks were to advise, mentor and train their local counterparts in different ministries and government agencies. These packages were coupled with the injection of aid funds, both grants and loans. As a part of the state-building agenda, it was assumed that if the aid programmes were successful, the recipient countries would move up the fragile states indexes and eventually graduate to become stable and developed societies. It should be underlined that any state-building agenda supported by external actors is a highly intrusive venture into the internal fabric of societies, but this notion did not figure much in the debate.

2. FRAGILE STATES AS SYSTEMS

In his memoir *Call Sign Chaos*, retired US Army General James Mattis emphasizes the importance of understanding history and mastering the larger currents that work in the world to avoid making the same mistakes again and again. Mattis points out that a simple idea is not enough: deeper analysis is needed to build a strategy for sustainable peace. This analysis should also extend beyond the obvious and most clearly visible organs of the fragile state.

As a partial response to the problems of the liberal peace paradigm, multiple academic commentators have called for a ‘local turn’¹² in peacebuilding. The first era of the local turn focused on tracing the signs of effectiveness of Western interventions at the village or individual level, which are often lacking. Often no positive change could be observed when one looked beyond the capital area. Recently, the local turn has been further developed to understand the political nature of the selection of the local entity.¹³ If one wants to assess the effectiveness of the interventions – or even better, plan an intervention – the selection of the entity itself must include a rigorous analysis. The aim is to find a local entity that can both serve as a litmus test for the success of the intervention, but more

importantly, also serve as a systemic node through which a change can be made.

Identifying these nodes as keys in the theory of change for the intervention is essential. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, an in-depth analysis at the level of local communities and villages would have been needed to design a strategy better suited to counter the Taliban, which acted as an important security provider for many communities.¹⁴ The recent discussion on interventions and the local turn challenges the notion that fragile states are simply states with weak central governance, pointing to them as complex systems with varying levels of resilience instead. In Afghanistan, building up the resilience of the core state, which appeared to be the grand logic of the intervention, was clearly not enough. In Afghanistan, the imposition of the state’s monopoly of violence never matched the coverage and reach of the Taliban. It is clear that looking beyond the obvious and quick solutions will require new thinking.

3. FOCUS ON THE STATE

The presented state-building agenda for fragile states has been widely criticized.¹⁵ In response to the above-mentioned problems and failures, such as Afghanistan, there is also a growing academic trend of rethinking the logic of interventions. There is a wide-ranging discussion criticizing the emphasis on state-building, prioritizing central governance and overall state structures instead. This emphasis, typically seen as focusing on reforming the state security sector, has relied on the idea that strengthening these structures provides safety and security. These are needed to allow civil society to develop, build its own capacities (possibly emulating Western structures), and eventually heal and stabilize the fragile state, while shifting the focus from state security to ‘human security’.

The concept of human security was born in the early 2000s out of the experiences of Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s. It was adopted by the EU to describe its approach towards civilian crisis management in particular.¹⁶ The novel idea of “trickle down peace” with a focus on the top layers of society has proved difficult

12 See e.g., Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013. Autesserre 2014, 2022.

13 Day 2022.

14 See Tykkyläinen et al. 2023.

15 Day 2022.

16 See https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/solana/040915capbar.pdf.

to realize. In practice, civilian crisis management has largely focused on state structures, while the necessary coordination with projects building civil society has been lacking.¹⁷ In many cases, civil society has not been able to develop to its full potential. The security sectors of states often abuse their powers, and their technical capacities do not correlate with legitimacy.

In many fragile states, the centralized systems of governance, such as the military and the police, tend to exist only in the capital or regional hubs and are virtually non-existent in rural and remote areas or in places otherwise beyond state control. These are also the same spaces in which destabilizing activity is often nested. In essence, if the intervention only focuses on the most easily identifiable target of support, it is often misplaced and ineffective. Strengthening central governance seldom trickles down to other areas or systems, but tends to create situations where the local elite controlling these networks start gaming the system and milking the donors for more and more aid. This leads to increased corruption and decreased accountability and democracy.

Even in less drastic cases, the flow of resources from donors creates unhelpful dependencies and situations in which the donors become agents in the conflict itself. This is at odds with the ‘do no harm’ principle that is supposed to be part and parcel of modern-day crisis management. For instance, the local military in Afghanistan became helpless when it was cut off from Western technology and maintenance. With the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the Afghan army was deprived of helicopter-borne medical evacuation services from the battlefield, leading to a loss of morale and motivation among Afghan soldiers. Similar consequences follow from dependencies at all levels of society if donors do not ensure that the transfer of capabilities and resources is sustainable. Failing this, the only thing that is sustained will be a protracted conflict that guarantees the inflow of donor-provided resources, creating a vicious cycle that is very difficult to break. This state of affairs was witnessed in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, where it has followed a strikingly similar pattern.

If state structures are corrupt and the actors involved focus more on personal gain than on the provision of safety and security for citizens, there is a risk that these structures will, contrary to wishful thinking, start eradicating the very societal networks and systems

that could serve as their counterforce. This is very much the reality in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Western interventions have inadvertently perfected state capture by providing more and more resources for corrupt warlords, who have then used those resources to cement their position. The result is a failed state in perpetual conflict and a war economy benefitting only a small corrupt elite. The shocking conclusion is that this development has not happened *despite* Western aid, but partly *because* of it.

4. SUCCESS STORIES ARE FEW

The assumption about the state-building agenda is that if the right policies and instruments are correctly applied, conflict-affected countries will move up the fragile states index, meaning that they will become less fragile as time passes. This, however, does not appear to be the case, apart from a few exceptions. For example, if the 2012 and 2022 fragile states indexes are closely examined, the conclusion is that most countries that were in the bottom quantile of the index in 2012 remained there in 2022.¹⁸ Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan, Haiti, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Chad feature in both indexes, which divide countries into seven categories: high alert, alert, high warning, elevated warning, warning, stable, and sustainable. Interestingly, Zimbabwe, Iraq, and Côte d’Ivoire featured in the ‘high alert’ category in 2012 but moved up the 2022 list from ‘high alert’ to the slightly less problematic ‘alert’ and ‘warning’ categories. New countries, such as Myanmar, Syria, and Guinea, are now featured in the ‘high alert’ category.

Although it would require closer examination to figure out the exact reasons why countries move up the list or why they appear in the ‘high alert’ category, it seems that the common denominator has something to do with internal politics.¹⁹ Either the country’s elites have achieved some sort of political resolution of the conflict, which has then ushered in an era of relative stability, or internal politics have torn the country’s political and social fabric apart, resulting in violence. In addition, it appears that there is a strong link between the quality of governance and fragility.²⁰ In other words, bad governance correlates with state

17 In many cases, the problems of coordination are not observations made in hindsight but were already apparent when the intervention was taking place. See e.g., Asplund et al. 2011, 13, who also described the notion of “local ownership” as a “rhetorical device” in Afghanistan.

18 See Fund for Peace Fragile States Index 2012 and 2022.

19 This ranking of countries moving up and down the fragile states index correlates with other indexes that measure political freedoms such as Freedom House, V-Dem Institute, and Bertelmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index, which analyze and evaluate whether and how developing countries are steering social change towards democracy and a market economy.

20 Ruohomäki, O. 2005.

weakness and fragility – and vice versa. Three questions that beg to be answered are: What role (if any) has the state-building agenda of external actors played in all of this? Has outside support helped these countries move up the ladder of state fragility? Or have state-building efforts helped to prevent the state's descent into chaos?

Equally important is the question of whether external intervention is only preventing the country in question from total collapse, and if so, whether it could be done in a less intrusive way. The lesson learned from many a fragile state is that an external intervention, involving massive amounts of aid and technical assistance in different sectors, does not help fix the problems at hand. In other words, would less assistance work just as well, or does it even matter at the end of the day? Experiences from a number of contexts, especially from Afghanistan and Iraq, suggest that the motto 'less is more' is highly applicable and should be pursued as a goal in any future crisis management endeavours in fragile contexts. The following sections probe more deeply into why this is the case.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Points of departure

The very basis of any external intervention is that a legitimate host government requests an external intervention to support its state-building agenda. There should be a common and, above all, very realistic shared understanding of the operational context by all external actors involved. This may sound trite, but one of the overwhelming lessons learned from the intervention in Afghanistan is that at no stage did the various actors have a common understanding of the situation at hand, nor a clear shared overarching strategy when it came to the desired end state and exit for external actors.

The military imperative of defeating the Taliban dominated much of the thinking, and there was an emphasis on swift actions and quick wins. Civilian crisis management actors focused for the most part on building some parts of the police sector, but it was not entirely clear how building a civilian police force would contribute to the long-term state-building agenda when much of the Afghan police force was busy fighting the Taliban on the frontlines. The aid community was propping up a fledgling Afghan state,

and the humanitarian agencies were busy delivering aid to distressed communities while complaining about the shrinking space for humanitarian action. Numerous reports about the evolving security and political situation were written, but they did not appear to add up to a grand overall strategy and action that would have contributed to a stable Afghan state.

In other words, international engagement in the country failed to recognize the links between security, political and development objectives. More importantly, local power brokers, warlords and strongmen used the external players to advance their personal agendas. The intervention inadvertently created social and political divisions and worsened the corruption and abuse that contributed to the fall of the Kabul regime in August 2021.²¹ Even more pervasive than foreign military operations was the ridiculously outsized footprint of the international presence and the totality of interventions. Being in economic terms larger than the organic GDP of the country itself, the international presence turned itself into a commodity: whilst 'rentier states' in fragile contexts are typically run on natural resources, in Afghanistan, serving the internationals became the number one source of profit for the local elites.

Organizational cultures and communication

In addition to disjointed actions by different actors, organizational cultures and communication are also a problem. There is an assumption that all actors involved have a common understanding of the language used to analyze the situation and the interventions needed. However, this is not the case: The military talks about 'winning the hearts and minds' of local communities and task forces. Diplomats and civilian crisis management actors talk about EU General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) conclusions and EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. Development actors talk about national poverty reduction strategies, country strategies and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Humanitarians talk about Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) and the like. If the external actors have difficulties understanding each other's respective mandates and roles, one can only imagine the challenges that the local authorities face in understanding what the external actors are up to. Much is lost in translation, both figuratively and literally.

²¹ Ruohomäki, O. 2021.

Multiple studies of Finland's participation in the international intervention in Afghanistan point out that coordination among different actors did not work, even when it was confined to only one nation taking part in these operations.²² Coordination was even more complicated within the coalition, which comprised some 44 states participating in the ISAF mission. In the case of Finland, the military, civilian crisis management and aid workers were all busy with their own pursuits, whether they were marketing Finland as a suitable partner for future military cooperation or putting Finland in the best possible light as a UNSCR 1325 champion. This is not to say that the goal of the Finnish participation in Afghanistan had nothing to do with the needs of the Afghan people, but it is quite clear that in many cases the primary need to which the Finnish activities were responding did not lie in Kabul but in Helsinki. A similar situation could be observed in many other European capitals and Washington. This alone is enough to make the participation suboptimal in terms of effectiveness.

The politics of crisis management

The political nature of crisis management is painfully clear in the case of Afghanistan, but at the same time it does not make Afghanistan in any way exceptional. In order to allow the international community to work on combining different levels of goal-setting, it has to be accepted that politics and crisis management are inseparable.²³ In the present day, trying to do everything and answer every call has led to wasted resources and ineffectiveness. This applies to all levels of analysis from the domestic level to the international and EU levels.

In some cases, the political nature of crisis management seems very difficult to grasp and accept, even for the decision-makers behind the intervention. The case of Mali is one of the most striking examples in the recent past. The EU's support for France's neocolonial interests in Mali was ill-placed to start with, but by showing their support for fellow EU member France, countries such as Finland and Germany ended up showing the rest of the African countries that the EU flag can be borrowed for a very particular and problematic agenda, which consequently damaged the EU's reputation across the continent.

The EU's current civilian military mission, EUBAM Libya, may be in danger of replicating the Mali outcome, this time serving the interests of Italy and Greece. A much more holistic approach is needed to recognize where it is necessary or even possible to intervene. Some of the possible theatres of operation are simply such that a successful intervention, even in theory, would require a massive effort and resources, and testing the waters might actually do more harm than good. When making the decision to act, and to carry out a crisis management operation, it is prudent to accept that sustainable change takes a very long time. Even military crisis management cannot be expected to deliver a fast exit. On the contrary, Kosovo is a good example of where a UN-mandated peacekeeping mission has now stayed for over two decades and in which Finland is increasing its participation with no clear plan or guiding idea.

Domestically, the first step could be to deconstruct the Finnish concept of comprehensive crisis management which, based on evidence, seems to have run out of steam since the 1990s and 2000s. Nowadays, the comprehensive approach has been reduced to its minimum definition, namely the presence of expertise from the military, civilian and humanitarian sides in the theatre of operations, but their actions appear to be poorly coordinated. As joint training and R&D activities in comprehensive crisis management have dwindled, the whole concept hardly seems valid anymore. A pragmatic step would be to accept that different strands of crisis management are not necessarily combinable – at least not at present – for the purpose of formulating a single coherent strategy. Once the different purposes and logic behind these tools are accepted, it is easier and more effective to design approaches that are not overarching and to accept the limitations of what an intervention can deliver.

Shrinking space for action

The operational contexts of modern-day protracted conflicts are immensely complex. The space for action is shrinking. Civilian workers are kidnapped, killed, and deliberately targeted by armed actors. In many instances, civilian missions become victims of what is sometimes referred to as bunkerization, namely being locked down in their bases and headquarters due to security situations that inhibit movement. This was typical in Afghanistan and still is in places like Iraq and Somalia. Even the neutrality of humanitarian organizations is no longer respected to the same extent as before.

²² See e.g., Mustasilta et al. 2022.

²³ Ruohomäki & Hakanen 2023.

Finnish crisis management policies and practices

At the time of writing, there are approximately 120 civilian crisis management experts seconded by Finland, who are divided into over 30 different field operations or secretariats. In more than half of those duty stations, there are only one to three Finnish secondees. It is clear that those solitary secondees cannot fulfil a very grandiose or demanding national goal. They have been placed there simply because the Finnish civilian crisis management strategy has always favoured one particular goal: to attain as high a number of secondees as possible, which for the last 15 years has meant a target of 150 secondees per year. This particular policy has created a situation in which Finland focuses heavily on the EU's civilian crisis management, partly because its operations and headquarters have the highest absorption capacity, and partly because they are compatible with the expert pool of Finnish national capabilities, which includes a wealth of expertise related to policing, the rule of law and the security sector.

With these parameters, it has been impossible to create a national strategy with more nuanced goals than slogans such as "Finland, bigger than its size".^a National goal-setting would also benefit from the idea of 'less is more'. If Finland were to relax its target of 150 secondees and allow a smaller number with a sharper focus, it could more easily find thematic and geographic areas of emphasis and focus its resources on them.^b This would concern not only the number of seconded experts, but also the domestic resources. For example, measuring the effectiveness of Finnish participation is currently impossible, as there are no measurable goals, and the number of Finnish secondees is so small in most of the missions that their individual impact is impossible to determine.^c In addition, with more than 30 duty stations for 120 secondees, it is just as impossible to monitor the effectiveness of the whole operation from the perspective of Finland's national goals.

The result is that no effective analysis is currently being carried out and Finland's approach is close to fire and forget. With much more focused participation, we could also focus our domestic analysis and planning capabilities so that actual goals could be set and assessed. However, this would probably mean forsaking the attachment to a single number of secondees, which would represent a major cultural change in civilian crisis management. Then again, Finland's crisis management participation is largely motivated by foreign policy goals and the will to be present in any given crisis context.

^a Ruohomäki & Hakanen 2022.

^b VNK 2014, 10.

^c Ruohomäki & Hakanen 2022.

This gives rise to a number of questions: What is the minimal level of security needed for non-military crisis management to be beneficial? To put it bluntly, is there an increasing trend of places and contexts where there is little point in engagement? Is it just a waste of effort and resources to attempt non-military crisis management in such places? Looking at the fragile states index and thinking in terms of cost effectiveness and results, would it be better to focus on those fragile states that are not in the bottom quintile year after year, but rather on those where the operational environment is more conducive to engagement – and above all, in which the political leadership signals the will to move forward? This is a difficult question to answer, but the evidence seems to suggest that this is indeed the case. Given how difficult it is to engage fragile states in a meaningful way, it may well be that countries like Afghanistan and Somalia will be left to their own devices – and as long

as massive numbers of people from fragile contexts do not attempt to migrate to the developed world, political leaders in the developed world will not really care.

Resource gaps

There is also a gap between the resources needed by the host state and the resources that donors are willing to provide. To take the EU's civilian crisis management as an example, in too many cases a new mission is established on the basis of a common desire by member states to do something together. In these cases, the primary motive for action is to strengthen the unity of the Union. If this happens to have a positive impact on the host, it is considered a bonus, but it is not necessarily the yardstick that the member states are using to measure the success of the operation. This logic is elemental for the EU, but it is also present elsewhere,

such as in the case of Finland’s participation in the crisis management operations in Afghanistan.²⁴

Crisis management participation can be used as a tool for diplomacy without the need to pay attention to its effects on the receiving end. Of course in order to have any chance of success, crisis management operations need to be at the invitation of the host nation,²⁵ but with the asymmetrical power relations between donors and hosts, this has seldom been an obstacle.²⁶ As in the case of EUAM Ukraine in 2014, the Ukrainian government welcomed the civilian crisis management operation, although it was not as robust as Ukraine would have liked, but rather a “light” strategic advisory mission, which was seen by some local officials as simply telling them “how to do things better”.²⁷

Another phenomenon in current crisis management is the problem of inverted supply and demand. The host nation might have a demand for a particular type of assistance, but this might be something that the donors are not capable of supplying, or are unwilling to supply. There might be legitimate reasons for this: cyber advisers, for example, are currently in high demand but extremely difficult to supply. On a larger scale, police officers who speak French are in constant demand for the EU’s African crisis management mission, but they are very difficult to find. However, too often, the supply side is based on donors wanting to supply a particular type of professionalism.

In Finland, national civilian crisis management capabilities are located within the Ministry of the Interior. This might result in viewing these capabilities disproportionately from the perspectives of the police and internal security. Moreover, when a pool of experts has been established as the national capability, it makes more sense to keep training and developing that particular pool instead of constantly changing it. When this logic is extrapolated to the level of the EU, we can see a situation in which member states actively influence the planning of operations and documents, such as mission mandates, to better fit their own capabilities. As a result, the demand becomes a bargaining process²⁸ in Brussels rather than something based on the need in the field, which leads to member states prioritizing the development of their own capabilities

rather than those of the host. This is in many cases connected to the fact that the contributing states have their own agendas for the operations, reflecting the capabilities they are providing. For example, a nation providing counter-terrorism experts might have a national agenda that it seeks to fulfil to prevent domestic terrorist attacks, even if this runs counter to the priorities of the host nation or the mission.

Interests of donors and host nations

Finally, it is certainly possible to reach a situation where interests meet, and donors want to provide the advisory support needed. In those cases, it is important to ensure that the advisors’ level of expertise meets the expectations. There have been documented problems caused by a mismatch between the ranks of advisor and advisee, meaning that a junior policy officer is appointed to work as an advisor to senior host nation officials. In these cases, the junior advisor is not taken seriously, and the opportunity is wasted. The scarcity of strategic-level advisors might lead to a loss of focus. Given the highly political nature of participation in crisis management, and the need for constituencies back home to see results, it is too easy to resort to developing operational capabilities through tactical training, possibly combined with providing equipment. While matching the level of demand and supply would produce easily measurable outputs and create the illusion of impact, it would not deliver change at the strategic level.

6. OWNERSHIP, AGENCY, AND EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

External actors often act as if the local context they are attempting to change is some sort of tabula rasa on which ideas and concepts can be built. The often-held assumption is that with the right inputs, such as training or different resources, the actions of external actors will succeed and change will take place. Nothing could be further from the truth, as there is no such thing as a clean slate in any society. On the contrary, there are always pre-existing structures, actors, and processes in place. In order for any external intervention to bear fruit, it must be grafted onto the existing reality, whatever that is, and carefully nurtured. Hence, large-scale interventions – such as those undertaken in Afghanistan or Iraq – seldom work for the very reason that the more intrusive the

24 Mustasilta et al. 2022; MoD, 2022.

25 There is a difference between UN R2P missions, which do not need an invitation by a host nation, and EU operations that are based on host nation consent.

26 There are some situations, such as the intervention in Kosovo, where there was no host nation in place to call for external intervention. These situations, however, tend to be exceptions.

27 Rieppola 2017.

28 Karjalainen and Savoranta 2021.

intervention, the more likely it is to be rejected by the target recipient. Even in the best-case scenario, the external input will be co-opted by the recipient for their own purposes. Some analysts argue that UN-led peacekeeping operations can achieve progress by protecting lives and decreasing the intensity of violence, but again the evidence is conflicting.

The discussion revolving around the role of external actors raises the question of agency and ownership. An anecdote from Afghanistan illustrates the point well. Some time ago, one of the authors of this paper had the opportunity to reflect on the Afghan experience with a very senior Afghan who had served as a cabinet minister in the former Kabul regime. He very frankly said: “We had no ownership whatsoever over the state-building project that the international community was attempting in Afghanistan. NATO had decided in one of its summits to create Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that would anchor the stabilization of the country at the provincial level. I then asked the then President Karzai what our position on the subject was. President Karzai replied that NATO does its thing and we Afghans do our thing.”

In other words, the creation of PRTs in the reality of Afghanistan was completely divorced from the Afghan government’s planning processes and visions. A huge amount of energy and resources went into the implementation of PRTs, but the result was at best chequered, and the overall outcome was a massive failure. The PRT concept was an alien structure imposed on a reality where local actors and players were more or less spectators. They were asked to fulfil roles that the external actors wanted them to perform in a show where they had little agency. This is also known in crisis management parlance as the triple crisis of consent.²⁹

The notion of ownership is linked to the earlier discussion above. It appears that those countries that have managed to transition successfully from the ‘high alert’ category in the fragile states index to the less problematic ‘alert’ and ‘warning’ categories – or even to higher categories – have managed to do something right within their body politic. For example, they may have managed to demonstrate ownership in internal political debates and to arrive at some sort of political dispensation that allows for at least the most vexing political differences among the parties to be settled in some way. To put it another way, they have managed to own their differences and resolve them

through internal dialogue processes, compromises, horse-trading, deals or electoral pacts.

Some researchers use the notion of elite bargains to characterize discrete agreements between contesting military, political and socio-economic elites to (re)negotiate the distribution of power, allocation of resources and rules of the game. In successful cases, outsiders may have contributed to the process in some way, for example through facilitation, or the provision of expertise or monetary resources. Despite this, they have remained outsiders, which should be the case in any political and societal process from the outset.

The point here is that any outside engagement needs to be very carefully calibrated and contextualized to take account of the local social and political fabric, and the will to reform the system. Outside actors should realize there is a fine line between supporting home-grown processes (at the explicit request of the local political leadership, reflecting the will of the majority) and imposing intrusive state-building policies and practices with a foreign stamp on them.

The above links to the discussion about expectation management. Outsiders’ expectations of success should be realistic and modest. Individual projects are at best only contributions to larger processes that take time to bear fruit. At worst, they create dependencies and import alien concepts and notions that do not lead to sustainable outcomes. Sometimes they may even foster competition between different players vying for the resources to prop up their own agendas, which have little to do with the stated objectives.

Crisis management in fragile states is a risky endeavour. The use of taxpayers’ money and resources needs to be well justified. At the same time, it is important to avoid creating unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved through an external intervention. Engagement in Afghanistan was justified by some political quarters in the Western world as ‘saving’ Afghan women from the oppressive policies of the Taliban. Whether this was really the case is highly debatable, but it nonetheless created expectations that gender relations in Afghan society could somehow be altered by fiat. This proved to be false, and many activists now criticize the West for abandoning Afghan women to their fate.

7. WHERE SHOULD THE FOCUS BE?

Antonio Giustozzi and Artemy Kalinovsky examined crisis management operations implemented by the Soviet Union, the United States, and various European countries, ranging from places such as Cuba and Vietnam to Egypt and El Salvador. They came to the conclusion that almost all larger operations failed.³⁰ This was particularly true for those operations that attempted to mould recipient societies into mirror images of the countries involved in the operations. The most successful operations were conducted by American military advisors in the Philippines, Greece, and South Korea. The objective of these operations was to support the reform agendas of the armies of the countries in question. In Giustozzi and Kalinovsky's opinion, the reasons for success were that the operations were small scale and unintrusive, and that the operational environments were conducive to receiving external aid.

Incidentally, these countries would not have been in the bottom quintile of the fragile states index, should such an index have existed at the time. The same goes for the civilian crisis management mission in Aceh, Indonesia, which is one of the few success stories in recent history. Here again, Indonesia at the time was a fairly well-developed state with relatively strong institutions in place. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have the example of Kosovo – a reasonably developed small area – which has shown that if military and civilian crisis management activities lack proper planning and a central idea, they can get stuck and fail to deliver even in the EU's own backyard.

As large-scale external interventions à la Afghanistan seem to be a thing of the past, any future crisis management operations should be agile, small scale, and composed of 'surgical teams' that undertake limited and clearly defined tasks.³¹ The motto here is 'the smaller and less intrusive the better', which is in line with the title of this paper: less is more. It is worth noting that while the term 'surgical' does have an intrusive angle to it, it does not entail in this context the concept 'surgical strikes' used in military parlance. Rather, a parallel can be sought in medicine and day surgery, which does not require hospitalization for recovery. Each intervention should be specifically tailored to the task at hand by operational planners. Of course,

the intervention logic should be debated and approved through appropriate political processes relevant to the organization in question, be it the Political and Security Committee in the EU or the United Nations Security Council in the UN system. The objective should be to find an answer to a clearly defined question and problem where the result would be easier to understand, and the impact easier to measure. If the act is simultaneously a catalyst for change, all the better.

Oskari Eronen, who works in the field of peace mediation, has written about well-executed peace mediation as artisanship.³² Similar thematics could be applied to well-performing crisis management. Current crisis management policies and practices are somewhat static: they tend to have ready-made blueprints, capabilities, and standardized planning processes. Questions need to be asked about how to re-evaluate and adapt the constantly changing situations first into crisis management policies and practices and further into responsive and relevant instruments. Above all, there needs to be an admission that crisis management is a highly political endeavour. This, of course, requires an appetite for risk, and acceptance of the fact that despite good intentions, the final result may not always meet the stated objectives.

In addition, it is important to integrate local knowledge with outside expertise. Crisis management could benefit from knowhow that has not yet been utilized to the full extent. For instance, urban planning, different digital applications, geospatial information systems, use of big data in planning and industrial process design, and lessons learned from peace mediation can help in planning systems and structures that build sustainable states and societies. These themes require further thinking and research.

Future crisis management should not be seen as a project or a mission, but rather as an attempt to support partners in building a working ecosystem, in which problems are solved through cooperation. In the final analysis, such an approach is not about building institutions (or even developing them), but rather about taking steps that allow the crisis management partners to face shocks and withstand them in the long term. At this juncture, careful consideration should be given to figuring out who the local partners are, and how their legitimacy is defined and anchored in the local social fabric.

30 Giustozzi and Kalinovsky 2016.

31 Kilcullen 2013 has argued precisely for the need for focused interventions.

32 Eronen 2016.

By nature, civilian crisis management is an activity which seeks to exert an impact at a strategic level. Its niche is to provide high-level mentoring and advisory support for officials working at the strategic level of local governance.³³ However, as we have seen above, the history of crisis management is filled with large-scale operations that have not produced the desired results. The reasons are also seen above. In crisis management, there are too many goals at too many levels. The states contributing to multilateral operations have their own national agendas and their own constituencies, as do the multilateral organizations – and of course the various populations and interest groups within the host nation.³⁴ Addressing all these goals has played a role in bloating missions and operations and making them less effective. The challenge that remains unresolved, however, is that it is extremely difficult to find an answer to the question of how to decide what and whose vision should guide action in a more limited mission.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This Working Paper has analyzed the relevance of crisis management policies and practices as they have been constructed and applied in conflict-ridden fragile contexts in the recent past. Success stories have been few and far between. External interventions have often created unhealthy dependencies and – at worst – have perpetuated corrupt war economies. Countries in the bottom quintile of the fragile states index do not benefit much from crisis management missions. It has become apparent that large crisis management missions are a

waste of taxpayers' money, as they seldom manage to solve the problems of fragile states.

Those countries that have moved up the fragile states index have managed to own their differences and settle them through internal dialogue processes, compromises, horse-trading, deals or electoral pacts. In successful cases, outsiders may have contributed to the process in some way, for example through facilitation, or the provision of expertise or monetary resources. Despite this, they have remained outsiders, which should be the case in any political and societal process from the outset.

Long-term change towards a stable and inclusive political dispensation stems from internal societal processes, and requires visionary political leadership to steer change in the right direction. These internal processes include the rise of the middle class, making quality education accessible to all, changes in demographic structures that balance the dependency ratio, and economic diversification.

The less outsiders meddle in the internal dynamics of societies the better, at least if outside meddling is destructive and does not benefit the entire country. Ownership must be in the hands of the people themselves. It is not for outsiders to provide the blueprints for what other societies should look like. At best, outside involvement, if requested by a large enough political class, can act as a catalyst for change, but for change to be sustainable it must be homegrown. Crisis management policies and practices alone cannot be the decisive drivers of change in conflict-ridden societies; they are at best only one factor among many affecting the change. /

33 Tammikko & Ruohomäki 2019.

34 Ruohomäki & Hakanen 2023.

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