

Call for Abstracts

From Neoliberal to Socially-Just Reconstruction – The role of civil society in shaping post-conflict reconstruction policies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya

FES Expert workshop, Beirut, 19-20 September 2017

The Middle East and North Africa region is currently witnessing a number of protracted military conflicts – in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya – which will, inevitably, all reach a political settlement stage where reconstruction efforts will take center stage, regardless of the comprehensiveness or sustainability of the respective settlement.

While each of the four war-torn countries is characterized by unique political and socio-economic conditions, as well as varying degrees of human casualties, physical destruction and foreign military involvement, the protracted conflicts have generated a common set of structural consequences: fractured political power that has given rise to competing military actors, including Islamic fundamentalist groups; geographical fragmentation; the emergence of localized forms of governance and service provision; crippled national economies; and increased social (and sectarian) polarization.

Reconstruction¹ in suchlike post-conflict settings faces manifold challenges, which are further complicated by the proliferation of neoliberal policy templates for reconstruction. The collusion of national capitalist elites and international donors in designing and implementing such reconstruction policies has proven to impede the struggle for social justice, instead exacerbating inequalities through prioritizing private as opposed to public interests.

Civil society² can potentially play a crucial role in breaking this cycle if it is capable of effectively articulating social interests and holding state decision-makers to account for their actions. Yet to fulfill this function, civil society organizations must be able to mobilize human and financial resources for collective ends, uphold mutual cooperation, and inspire social trust, amongst other.

To explore how civil society can achieve this, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is inviting academics, researchers and civil society representatives from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya (or with significant research/ professional experience on these countries) to participate in an expert workshop in Beirut on 19-20 September 2017. Interested participants are invited to submit abstracts on the following two themes:

¹ The workshop will build on a narrow definition of reconstruction as “the rebuilding of the physical infrastructure and socio-economic framework of a society”. While the processes of peace building and/or state building are often inextricably linked to reconstruction, inducing a need to eventually address these three tasks holistically, the workshop aims to analytically focus on determinants of reconstruction as a first step.

² Civil society is understood here as “institutionalized social networks”, some of which take the form of formal membership organisations, others may be much more informal in nature. Examples are political associations, trade unions, human rights monitors, independent think tanks, advocacy groups, humanitarian organisations, educational initiatives, cultural societies, etc.

1. Agency in post-conflict reconstruction

In societies emerging from protracted conflicts, the disintegration of formal political systems and decision-making procedures often conceals who the real agents of political power on the national level are. As the case of Lebanon shows, reconstruction processes in the absence of legitimate democratic institutions provide ample space for corrupt and intransparent practices that serve the interests of private capitalists and patronage networks of decision-makers, while disregarding the welfare of society's most vulnerable groups. How, then, to avoid a reconstruction scenario like in Lebanon, where sometimes conflicting, sometimes cooperating political elites exploited post-war reconstruction as a rent-creation mechanism to the detriment of society as a whole? How to ensure that decisions around reconstruction approaches are taken on the basis of what best serves the public interest? And how can civil society initiatives protect themselves from being coopted or clientelized by political actors?

Contributions under this theme should focus on either

- The analysis of classes, elites and networks involved in decision-making, and explore the implications of changing political power structures and their vested interests in a future post-conflict reconstruction phase in one of the four studied countries.
- Or discuss how civil society actors can (and perhaps already have) effectively counter(ed) potential rent-seeking reconstruction approaches on the national level, and advocate for inclusive and transparent decision-making.

2. Policy in post-conflict reconstruction

The Washington-based international financial institutions (World Bank, IMF) and major donor states are working at full steam on scenario planning and formulating policy recommendations for the reconstruction phases in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. As per their *raison d'être*, IFIs will offer vast amounts of reconstruction grants and loans subject to the partnering country meeting a comprehensive range of economic policy conditions. With little considerations for structural and historical nuances of the partner country, these conditions typically constitute irreversible steps towards market liberalization, trade liberalization, and reducing the role of the state. However, given the track record of such context-unspecific neoliberal approaches to reconstruction policies in exacerbating socio-economic inequalities, discussing the question of how civil society can counteract the vicious cycle of debt conditionality remains essential.

Contributions under this theme should focus on either

- The analysis of the content of reconstruction policies recommended by IFIs and donor countries to the governments of the studied countries, as well as the nature of their interactions with national stakeholders. Particular emphasis could be put on, for example, investment and property rights laws, social security provision, industrial policy, or labor market deregulation.
- Or discuss the advocacy and activism experience of civil society actors from these countries in trying to influence the contents of reconstruction policies, including tactics on taking public action, building coalitions and consensus, and developing alternative policy recommendations.

Application procedures and additional information

Deadline for submission of abstracts to reconstruction@feslb.org, which should be 300-500 words (in English or Arabic), will be 2 July 2017. FES will select participants by the end of July, for whom all travel and accommodation expenses are covered.

Selected participants will be asked to present their papers/ contributions at the workshop, and actively participate in the discussions. FES is planning to publish the most relevant contributions of the workshop in subsequent months.

For any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact reconstruction@feslb.org.