

Engaging with non-state actors in fragile settings



“Local people should actually question international agencies on their legitimacy, and we should listen to the voices of the poor... Why is it so difficult for representatives of international agencies to make this shift?”

– Mareike Schomerus, Justice and Security Research Programme

Mareike Schomerus and Koen Vlassenroot of the [Justice and Security Research Programme](#) were participants in last month’s round-table debate at the [World Conference on Humanitarian Studies](#) in Istanbul on how NGOs and donors can more effectively engage with non-state actors in fragile settings.

The roundtable was organized by [The Broker](#), an independent platform and online magazine on globalisation and development, and the IS Academy Human Security and Fragile States. The event is [summarized in detail in a recent write-up on their blog](#):

There is a particular lack of knowledge on the level at which different state and non-state institutions interact dynamically, and on how legitimacy is constructed. This critical knowledge gap may undermine forms of engagement with non-state governance: if we want to ‘work with what is there’, how are we to do that? This was the background against which the round table discussion was held.

Koen Vlassenroot (Conflict Research Group, UGhent) underlined that it is often very hard, and not always that useful, to distinguish non-state from state actors:

Because this local complexity is misinterpreted, engaging with non-state actors without involving the state runs the risk of achieving the opposite, undermining or further marginalizing the state, and possibly allowing non-state actors to become dominant. In Eastern Congo, for example, there is a real risk of non-state actors – in this case militias – overpowering the state, with unpredictable consequences for security. Moreover, there is tension between what interventions aim to achieve – based on normative assumptions about a certain type of political system – and

local realities, which are driven by different dynamics. It is important to realize that intervening agencies are themselves part of these local complexities.

You can read a [full write-up of the roundtable on The Broker's website](#), which also includes a video commentary by Dr. Vlassenroot.

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