

Project Abstract/Summary

Proposal Title: All Intervention is Local: Understanding Government Responses to International Intervention

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Research Problem: Interventions in fragile and post-conflict states are often designed and implemented by outside actors as technocratic responses to situations of political disorder, state weakness, and civil unrest. The interventions, often built on international best practices, rarely unfold in the ways initially conceived by their designers, however, because in reality, these are highly political processes. We propose to investigate how the ways that local actors and institutional environments engage with these projects during implementation significantly changes their nature, by proposing two related questions. First, how do local political dynamics explain variations in the degree and type of engagement of African regimes with outside actors, particularly in conflict-affected countries where international and local agents share sovereignty? Second, how do these variations condition the course of the intervention and the actions of the interveners?

When we ground the analysis of the dynamics of interventions in fragile states in basic concepts and theories of African politics, how does this shift our understanding of process? What seeming puzzles, inconsistencies, and unexpected dynamics become more understandable – perhaps things that could have been anticipated? This research links fundamental political concepts such as neopatrimonialism, instrumentalization, extraversion, state historicity, and hybrid governance, to crucial policy issues of relevance to the DoD, such as intervention design, local capacity building and overall complex peace-keeping operations that involve a significant degree of state reform and reconstruction (security sector reform, public sector reform, democratization, etc.). Interventions are conceived technocratically, but they are fundamentally political undertakings. By “bringing the politics back in,” we believe that our research can make new strides in our understanding of how African governments respond to and interact with external interventions, particularly those in conflict affected and fragile states, delivering insights that can be applied to the design and implementation of future interventions.

Methods: This project will utilize an innovative basket of different methods that can leverage each other’s insights in analytical multiplier effect. Capitalizing on the 3-year duration of the project, we intend to mix quantitative and qualitative methods. For the former, we will develop a two-stage approach, based first on a panel or cross-sectional analysis of governments’ responses to interventions in all Sub-Saharan African countries and, second, on survey data of “interveners” collected during our fieldwork. For the latter, we will blend ethnographic-style fieldwork in four countries among “interveners” and “intervened,” participant observation within intervener institutions, surveys and the systematic qualitative accompaniment of specific actors over the three-year period. All of this will follow an initial in-depth literature and data review for the whole continent, complemented by process tracing of the specific interactions with donors in our country cases.

Anticipated Outcomes: The project will develop a detailed analysis of why African regimes respond to and engage with external actors in specific, predictable patterns. While basic research, the answers to these questions, can be applied to draw lessons for designing future interventions, based on insights about how variations in local politics and institutions shape interventions in fragile and post-conflict states.

Impact on DoD Capabilities or Broader Implications for National Defense: The DoD routinely engages in capacity building exercises, particularly in Africa but also in other world regions. Understanding how area governments engage with these efforts is critically important to their successful execution – and in some instances, may lead DoD/OSD to decide not to engage at all (thus saving significant financial and human resources that could be used elsewhere). National Defense requires a nuanced understanding of the motivation of allied and hostile nations, and this type of analysis provides insights into the political dynamics that influence the beliefs and behavior of regimes, in Africa and elsewhere.

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Minerva Interest Area Number: A - General Interest Area: Sociality, Security, and Interconnectivity

Total funds requested: \$773,357