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The frayed state

By Christian von Haldenwang,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

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Bonn, 14 July 2014. The debate regarding the post-2015 agenda, i.e. the goals of global development after 2015, places obligations on states – including the states of the northern hemisphere. On the one hand, this is understandable: after all, the nation-state continues to provide key services. And what is more: recent progress in tackling global challenges – such as tax evasion – has been largely down to the initiative of individual states or small groups of states. In contrast, the multilateral organisations have proved to be weak when it comes to decision making and implementation.

However, on the other hand, nation-states are not structurally up to the task of managing the necessary reforms. Because for some time now the state has been fraying at the edges – upwards, downwards and to the side.

- *Upwards:* States are relinquishing ever more decision-making responsibilities to international and intergovernmental bodies. One example here is free trade and investment treaties, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership currently being negotiated between Europe and the USA. Here decision-making responsibility in the event of conflict is transferred to cross-national arbitration boards.
- *Downwards:* Developing countries are following the global north in transferring more and more responsibilities to sub-national authorities. Governing in complex, multi-layered systems has become commonplace in the majority of countries.
- *To the side:* Non-state actors (civil society organisations, companies etc.) are assuming tasks that were previously firmly in the remit of public administration. For example, in many cases municipalities are shifting responsibility for central services such as the supply of drinking water to private sector organisations.

The fraying of the state is not something that only became apparent yesterday. However, the process is being accelerated by the enormous consolidation and acceleration of global information and communication flows. As a consequence, governments are finding themselves increasingly unable to make and implement decisions in the common interest.

A further factor is that states which perhaps skim off one sixth or less of gross national product in the form of taxes and charges see themselves faced with the requirements of a globally-informed population that orients itself towards the wealth levels of the OECD nations. However, it is not possible to finance public services the standard of those of Sweden with tax receipts comparable to those of Indonesia.

The incapacity of the nation-states is causing a gap to emerge between the requirements of collective action and the institutional structures that make such action possible. More and more decisions are not taken by those dependent on garnering the votes of the electorate. The political order of global society subsequently has a congruence problem: the national states still bear the main burden of legitimation. They should define the common interest and pursue this. However, the distribution of assets both nationally and internationally is increasingly being decided upon by other actors. Despite this, we still act as though both operations – legitimisation and allocation – cover one another.

Modern international co-operation needs to address the concerns of the fraying of the state. Here are three points regarding this:

Firstly, the globalised companies and private assets need to take on greater obligations than has been the case thus far. The common good obligation of ownership is a central pillar of our constitution. If this standard is to also be applied internationally, this can only be achieved via the effective regulation of global flows of capital. The systematic breaching of elementary social and environmental standards in many economic sectors can similarly only be halted through international action. However, there is still a lack of perspective in the post-2015 goals explicitly involving the economic actors in the process.

Secondly: Citizens today have opportunities for political mobilisation and articulation that were scarcely conceivable just a few years ago. This opinion-forming resource is used far too little. That which is still to be found as solidarity at national level, due to functioning mechanisms of political participation and representation, is misunderstood as a charitable project at a global level if those affected have no political voice. The new global social contract therefore presupposes new, similarly global structures of political communication and involvement.

Thirdly: “Coalitions of the willing” are key vehicles to spur changes at international level. Such “club governance” structures need to be carried over into multilateral structures in the long term, however. We need a reform of the United Nations. This will not be easy to achieve, but if we merely hope that those benefitting from the current situation see sense of their own volition, then change will probably never occur.

Against this background, the specific goals that global society sets for the post-2015 agenda are of secondary importance. Of far greater significance is who is involved in the formulation of the goals and what actors are involved in their realisation.