



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
Renaissance Strategic Center



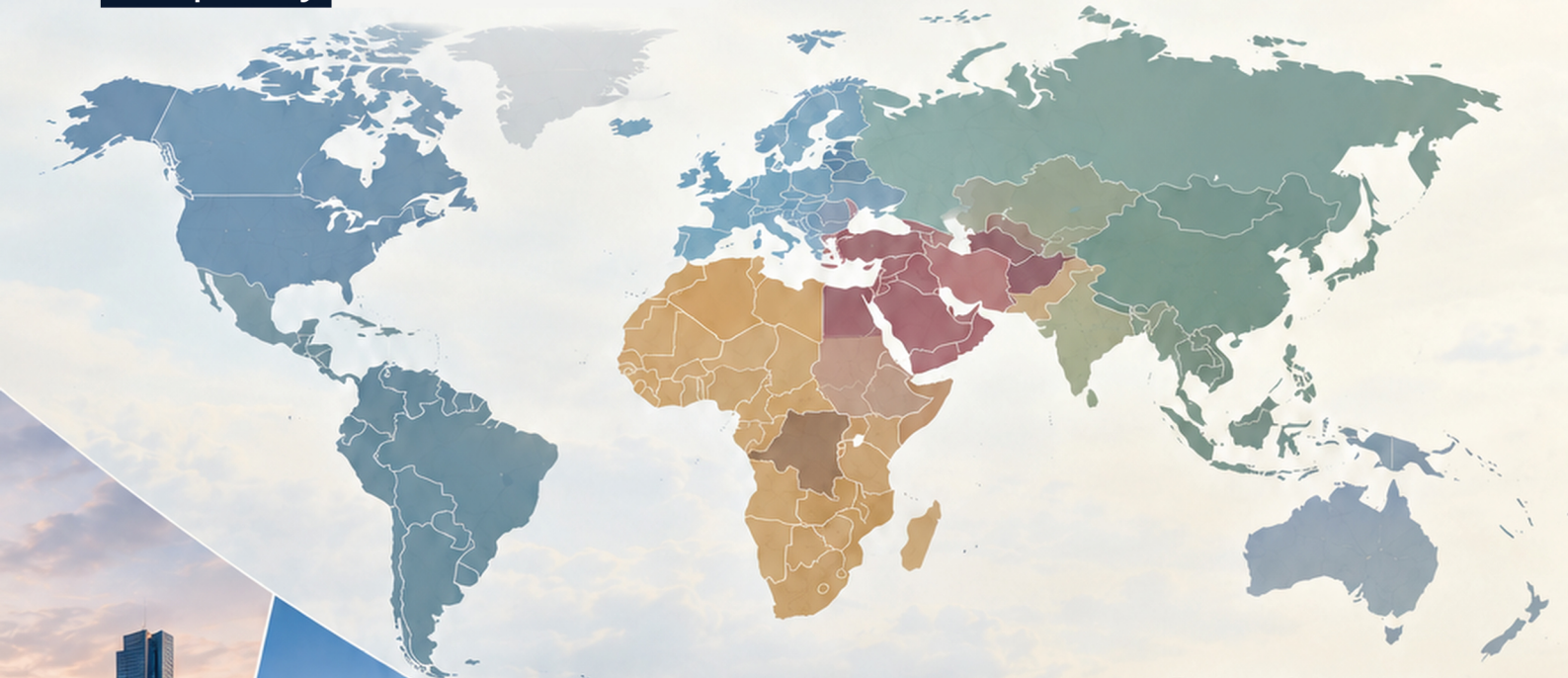
ODI Global

From Activism to Governance

Rethinking State-Building
in an Age of Fragmentation

PEOPLE
PLACES
POSSIBILITIES
STRONGER
SOCIETIES

A Report by Charles Petrie



*Comparative perspectives
for a more inclusive,
legitimate and resilient future.*



AMERICAS

EUROPE

AFRICA

MENA

ASIA

OCEANIA



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

Table Of Content

Executive Summary.....	3
When activism becomes governance	4
Legitimacy before Recognition	5
The Danger of Romanticising the Local	5
From Resistance to Institutions	6
Justice Cannot Always Wait for Peace	7
A Different Way of Rebuilding the State	7
What this Means for International Actors	8
From Restoring Authority to Building Legitimacy	8
Seminar 1	10
Communication Strategies, Social Media, and Movements.....	10
The Provision of Services and Governance.....	11
The Question of Legitimacy	12
Seminar 2	14
Comparing Forms of Local Governance in the Presence, or Absence,	14
of the State.....	14
Seminar 3	18
<i>‘Diaspora, Transitional Justice and the Politics of Legitimacy’</i>	<i>18</i>
Introduction.....	18
Diaspora: Living Between Home and Abroad.....	18
Beyond Remittances: From Financing Activism to Supporting Governance	19
Representation, Polarisation and Return	20
Transitional Justice Beyond the Post-Conflict Paradigm	21
Justice, Reconciliation and Community Healing.....	22
Emerging Reflections.....	23

From Activism to Governance

A Policy Paper by Sir Charles Petrie¹

The *Local Governance Comparative Approaches* Seminar Series was conceived by Charles Petrie and jointly led with Jago Salmon of ODI Global. The thinking behind the initiative was an opportunity to rethink prevailing assumptions about governance and state-building in societies affected by conflict, political transition and state fragility. Convened by the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD in partnership with ODI Global, the initiative benefited from the outstanding research and organisational support of a dedicated team of ARDD interns² and a remarkable ODI Global colleague³

From the outset, the seminars were designed to be different from conventional policy conferences. Recognising that many of the most important lessons from conflict-affected societies are rarely voiced in public forums, the series was conducted as three closed seminars under the Chatham House Rule. This created a trusted space in which activists, researchers and governance practitioners from across Africa, Asia and the Middle East could engage in open and candid discussion, drawing not only on academic analysis but on their own lived experience of conflict, political transition and governance.

The seminars were structured as a cumulative exploration of one central question: how do societies move from activism to legitimate and sustainable governance? Rather than examining individual country experiences in isolation, each session addressed a different stage of this broader political transformation, allowing common themes and comparative lessons to emerge across widely differing contexts.

The following paper summarises the principal points raised across the three seminars. It begins with an extended Executive Summary that seeks to draw together the broader themes and conclusions emerging from the discussions.

¹ Former British diplomat, former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, and Advisor to ARDD.

² Rotation of ARDD interns comprised of: Abigail Harper, Bibi Loeven, Chiara Pirelli, Clea Morris, Gregory Pearson, Giulia Zorzo, Jules Dupuy and Sebastian Spadafora.

³ Anushka Sisdoia

Executive Summary

Rethinking State-Building in an Age of Fragmentation

For more than three decades, international peacebuilding has been guided by a remarkably resilient assumption, rooted in a Westphalian understanding of political order: conflict fragments states; peace restores them. Rebuild national institutions, strengthen central government, hold elections, and authority will gradually flow once again from the capital to the periphery.

Over the course of three comparative international seminars on activism and local governance, we set out to test that assumption against the experience of people confronting very different political realities. Activists, researchers and governance practitioners from Africa, the Middle East and Asia came together in closed discussions to examine what happens when central authority weakens, fragments or loses legitimacy, and when movements created to challenge authority find themselves assuming some of the responsibilities of government.

The seminars approached the question from different directions. The first examined the transition from mobilisation to governance: how movements created around protest, resistance or emergency response begin to acquire responsibility for institutions, services and political decision-making. The second looked more directly at forms of governance emerging within existing state structures, alongside them and where the state has ceased to exercise meaningful authority. The third widened the discussion to diaspora communities and transitional justice, while raising a question that ultimately ran through all three: *who has the legitimacy to shape the political order that follows?*

What emerged from these very different experiences was not a model. The political histories of Myanmar, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, Yemen and the other societies represented were far too different for that. But there was a striking convergence around a more fundamental proposition: fragmentation is no longer simply an interruption between war and peace. In many societies, it has become the political landscape from which any future state will have to emerge.

This conclusion also reflects a pattern visible over decades in countries affected by conflict, state collapse and political transition. Communities rarely wait for peace agreements before rebuilding the institutions upon which everyday life depends. Schools reopen. Water systems are repaired. Health services resume. Community security arrangements emerge. Public authority reappears long before the state itself has recovered.

Yet international peacebuilding continues largely to operate on the assumption that political legitimacy originates primarily in the state. Governments derive authority through constitutional recognition, sovereignty and international acceptance; governance follows.

Increasingly, however, the relationship may work in the opposite direction. Governance does not necessarily wait for government. And legitimate governance may ultimately be what makes the reconstruction of the state possible.

When activism becomes governance

The conventional distinction between activism and governance is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Movements created to resist authoritarianism, respond to humanitarian crises or defend communities increasingly find themselves performing functions traditionally associated with government. They organise education and healthcare, negotiate humanitarian access, administer justice, maintain security and establish mechanisms for political decision-making.

But one of the clearest lessons from the seminars is that the transition from activism to emergency service provision and then governance is neither automatic nor linear. A movement may be exceptionally effective at mobilising people against an existing political order and yet be poorly prepared to govern. An organisation may keep hospitals or schools functioning during a crisis without possessing the institutions required to exercise legitimate public authority. And a structure created as an emergency response may gradually become permanent without developing accountability.

Karenni State in Myanmar provides perhaps the clearest example of a successful transition. Following the 2021 military coup, institutions were constructed from the village level upwards while conflict was still taking place. The Karenni State Consultative Council and subsequently the Interim Executive Council began developing administrative structures, collecting revenues, operating courts and supporting education and healthcare. Civilian governance was not postponed until military victory. It became part of the struggle itself.

Lebanon presented almost the opposite experience. Activists attempting to transform the system from within discovered that acquiring formal political authority did not necessarily increase their legitimacy. Once inside existing institutions, reformers had to negotiate with bureaucracies and political structures they had previously opposed. Some found themselves associated almost immediately with the dysfunction of the system they had entered.

Georgia illustrated a third possibility. Under conditions of increasing repression, the immediate challenge was neither entering government nor constructing an alternative one, but preserving the movement itself: maintaining organisational capacity, networks and spaces for political action in the face of imprisonment, exhaustion and exile.

And Yemen offered another reality. Activists who eventually entered government could find themselves operating through many of the same structures they had originally mobilised to change.

These are very different trajectories. But together they suggest that movements confronting authoritarianism or state collapse need to develop the capacity to govern much earlier than conventional political transitions assume. The skills required to mobilise people are not necessarily those required to administer institutions, manage public finances, resolve competing interests or maintain legitimacy once difficult decisions have to be made. If movements wait until a political transition has taken hold, it will be already be too late.

Legitimacy before Recognition

This leads to a more fundamental question. *Where does political legitimacy actually come from?*

For much of the twentieth century, the international system offered a relatively straightforward answer. Governments governed because they possessed constitutional authority, sovereignty and international recognition. Legitimacy was closely associated with the institutions of the state.

The experiences examined through the seminars suggest a more complicated reality. Communities do not necessarily ask whether an institution possesses international recognition before deciding whether to trust it. They ask whether it keeps schools functioning, resolves disputes fairly, provides healthcare, maintains security and allows people some meaningful voice over the decisions affecting their lives. Legitimacy, in other words, is earned before it is formally recognised.

Karenni demonstrates one side of this equation. Institutions without formal international status have acquired authority partly because communities experience them as providing services and representing a collective political project. Lebanon illustrates the reverse: institutions can retain constitutional legality while suffering a profound erosion of public confidence.

This distinction between government and governance matters. Government refers to institutions possessing formal political authority. Governance concerns the practical exercise of public authority: the organisation of security, justice, services and collective decision-making.

Governments can collapse. They can lose territory, capacity or public confidence. Governance cannot simply disappear. Someone will fill the space. The real question is therefore not whether authority will emerge when the state retreats. It is *who will exercise it, and on what basis they will claim legitimacy*.

The Danger of Romanticising the Local

None of this means that local authority is inherently legitimate. Fragmentation can produce extraordinarily different political outcomes. The vacuum left by a weakened state can be occupied by civic organisations and accountable local administrations. It can equally be occupied by warlords, criminal networks, sectarian organisations or armed movements whose authority derives from coercion rather than consent.

Indeed, one of the dangers of the growing international interest in localisation is that it can romanticise the local in much the same way that earlier approaches romanticised the state. Local institutions can reproduce existing inequalities. Armed actors can capture civilian structures. Traditional elites can reassert themselves. Emergency institutions can become permanent without meaningful accountability. Organisations dependent upon external financing can become more responsive to donors than to the communities they claim to represent.

Diaspora involvement introduces another complexity. Diaspora communities can provide money, expertise, international connections and political space unavailable to those living under conflict or authoritarian rule. They can bring local experiences into international debates that would otherwise ignore them. But distance also changes political perspectives. Those who have left and those who remain may experience the same conflict very differently. Diaspora communities are themselves divided by generation, class, political affiliation and circumstance. Greater access to resources and international institutions does not necessarily confer greater political legitimacy.

The question is therefore not whether authority is local or national. It is whether authority is accountable to the people over whom it is exercised.

From Resistance to Institutions

That distinction has practical consequences. Movements can survive for considerable periods through voluntary contributions, solidarity networks and external assistance. Governing institutions cannot.

Sustainable governance ultimately requires resources that are predictable and some form of relationship between revenue and accountability. Taxation matters not simply because governments need money, but because raising resources from a population creates a fundamentally different relationship between institutions and citizens. It forces questions about representation, transparency and what people receive in return.

External assistance remains important, particularly while conflict continues, but it can also distort precisely the institutions it is intended to strengthen. Syria provides a warning. Local councils dependent upon international support could be extremely vulnerable when donor priorities changed or funding disappeared. Better-resourced actors could then replace institutions that had developed significant local experience but lacked a sustainable financial base.

Foreign support can also become a political liability. Governments seeking to discredit civic movements increasingly portray externally financed organisations as agents of foreign powers. In highly repressive environments, international assistance intended to strengthen civil society can therefore inadvertently make it more vulnerable.

The question for donors should consequently be less about how to finance particular projects and more about how external resources can help locally legitimate institutions become sustainable without making them externally dependent.

The Karenni discussions raised one potentially important approach: a financing arrangement - Karenni Regional Trust Fund - combining donor resources with meaningful local control, transparent financial management and community accountability. The importance lies less in the particular mechanism than in the principle behind it. External support should reinforce the political relationship between institutions and communities rather than replace it.

Justice Cannot Always Wait for Peace

The same change in thinking applies to transitional justice. Conventional approaches frequently assume a sequence: first end the conflict and establish a political settlement; then address accountability and reconciliation. The experiences discussed during the seminars challenged that assumption.

Afghanistan demonstrated the consequences of postponing difficult questions of accountability in the interests of short-term political stability. Incorporating powerful warlords into the post-2001 political order may have helped secure an immediate settlement, but it also allowed some of those actors to consolidate their position, making accountability increasingly difficult later.

Syria raises a different problem. Communities may have radically different understandings of who is a perpetrator and who is a defender. There may be no nationally accepted account of what happened upon which a formal transitional justice process can initially be constructed.

Yet justice does not begin only with prosecutions.

Acknowledging harm, recording what happened, creating trusted mechanisms for resolving grievances and allowing communities to confront the past can begin while conflict continues. Local institutions that take these responsibilities seriously may also strengthen their own legitimacy. Justice and governance are therefore more closely connected than they sometimes appear. Institutions establish trust not only through what they provide but through how they treat people, how they address abuse and whether those exercising authority can themselves be held accountable.

A Different Way of Rebuilding the State

Taken together, these experiences point towards a larger conclusion.

International peacebuilding has traditionally approached fragmented societies from the centre outwards. Peace negotiations establish national institutions. International recognition reinforces the central government. Aid strengthens ministries. Elections confer political authority. Local government is then constructed or restored beneath this national architecture.

But what if the political reality is developing in the opposite direction?

What if, during years or decades of conflict, communities have already constructed institutions, negotiated systems of authority and developed political relationships that cannot simply be erased when a peace agreement is signed?

In that case, rebuilding the state cannot simply mean restoring the institutions that existed before the conflict. It must also mean understanding what has emerged during it.

This does not amount to an argument against the state. Cohesive states remain essential for guaranteeing rights, ensuring equality before the law, redistributing resources and sustaining a wider sense of national solidarity.

But cohesion should not be confused with centralisation, nor unity with uniformity. The strongest states of the future may be those capable of accommodating multiple centres of legitimate authority rather than attempting to eliminate them.

This changes the fundamental task of state-building. Instead of asking only how authority can be restored to the centre, international actors should also ask where legitimate authority already exists; how it acquired that legitimacy; how it can be made more accountable; and how different centres of authority might eventually be connected within a wider constitutional and political system. *Legitimate governance may be what ultimately makes the reconstruction of the state possible.*

What this Means for International Actors

Such an approach would require several changes in international practice:

First, international actors need to become better at recognising governance by what institutions actually do, rather than solely by their formal status. International recognition cannot cease to matter, but it should not prevent engagement with institutions that exercise meaningful public authority and command genuine community confidence.

Second, support for political movements needs to begin considering governance long before a formal transition occurs. Administrative capacity, financial management, civilian oversight, accountability and mechanisms for political participation cannot suddenly be created once a peace agreement is signed.

Third, external financing needs to strengthen the relationship between governing institutions and the people they serve. Assistance that substitutes indefinitely for domestic political and financial accountability may keep institutions alive while preventing them from becoming sustainable.

Fourth, international actors need to take much more seriously the horizontal exchange of experience between societies confronting fragmentation. Knowledge about state-building has traditionally travelled vertically: from international institutions and outside experts towards national and local actors. Yet activists and local governing institutions are increasingly learning from one another; about service delivery, accountability, civilian-military relations, financing, diaspora engagement and the preservation of legitimacy.

The purpose is not to transfer the Karenni model to Sudan or the Syrian experience to Lebanon. It is to allow people confronting comparable political dilemmas to learn from the successes and failures of others.

This may be one of the most important lessons from the comparative seminars themselves. There is an emerging body of knowledge about how societies govern themselves when recognised institutions no longer function as assumed. Much of that knowledge remains fragmented between countries, movements and individual experiences. Connecting those experiences may therefore be almost as important as connecting institutions.

From Restoring Authority to Building Legitimacy

For decades, international state-building has largely worked from the assumption that reconstructing the institutions of government will eventually recreate legitimate governance. The experience of fragmented states suggests that in some contexts the relationship may work in the opposite direction.

Governance emerges because it has to. Communities construct institutions because daily life cannot wait for national political settlements. Some of those institutions will fail. Some will become predatory. Some will be captured by armed actors or political elites. But others will earn public confidence. Those institutions should not simply be regarded as temporary arrangements awaiting the return of the "real" state. They may represent part of the political foundation upon which that state will eventually have to be rebuilt.

The twenty-first century may therefore be witnessing not the disappearance of the state, but a redistribution of authority, legitimacy and governance within it. The challenge for peacebuilding is to recognise that reality without institutionalising fragmentation; to support local authority without romanticising it; and to preserve national cohesion without assuming that cohesion requires the concentration of political power at the centre.

The problem confronting fragmented societies is not necessarily that governance has disappeared. It is that governance has emerged in places where the international system has not traditionally known how to see it.

The future of state-building may therefore depend less upon restoring the authority of the centre than upon identifying, strengthening and ultimately connecting the legitimacy that has already begun to take root within society itself.

15 August 2026
Charles Petrie



Seminar 1

'From Mobilisation to Governance'

On 17 March 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the first session of the *Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars*. The seminar forms part of a four-part series aimed at collectively exploring the evolution from activism to governance, culminating in a policy-oriented output. The proposed approach of this initiative is to convene a series of four closed virtual seminars, each building on the previous discussions, with the aim of developing policy-relevant thought leadership and knowledge outputs. The suggested themes of the different sessions are: (i) From Mobilisation to Governance, (ii) Comparing Forms of Service Delivery and Governance, (iii) International Systems and Transitional Justice, and (iv) the Role of Local Governance in Transforming the State.

The first session in the series, 'From Mobilisation to Governance', aimed to convene a group of civic actors, activists, and researchers from around the world to discuss the essential precursors of mass popular mobilisation, what activist movements have achieved, and what lessons can be learned from the politics and process of 'transition.' Three main objectives underpinned these discussions: to deepen collective understanding of the new wave of activism that began with - but did not end in - the Arab Spring; to create a space for activists to reflect candidly on their experiences, strategies, successes and frustrations; and finally, to inform and influence international engagement with this emerging generation of civic actors. This discussion invited activists from Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, Madagascar, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Yemen and Zambia.

Chatham House Rules governed the deliberations; while the substance of the discussions could be shared, the identity and affiliation of those who made the points would be protected.

Key Findings

Communication Strategies, Social Media, and Movements

Social media is critical for mass popular organising, allowing for the amplification of collective grievances, the acceleration of the flow of information, and the enabling of awareness raising and new forms of mobilising at scale. However, digital spaces can entrench division and reinforce polarisation with the creation of exclusive and polarised echo chambers. Regimes have also adapted to social media, harnessing 'online armies' and structured disinformation to demobilise and delegitimise civic actors.

Clear and organised messaging is important to transition from activism to governance. Movements that transition into governing roles without a coherent communications plan, strategized outreach, and clearly outlined goals quickly lose momentum, and risk losing popular support, becoming delegitimised or failing to facilitate tangible change. In Lebanon protests occurred in 2019 and it was clear that some lessons had been learned from previous regional protests in 2011. When activists moved to work in municipal elections, they immediately hired a marketing company, creating campaigns with a clear strategy and communicating to the population that even though they were entering into traditional politics, they were still aligned with the grievances of protestors on the street.

Durable mobilisation still very much depends on physical presence, trust-building, and organisation at the ground-level. Without this, online activism risks becoming performative rather than transformative. Furthermore, the reach of social media - such as its capacity to reach diverse segments of the population or to influence governmental decision-makers - is limited, throwing into doubt its usefulness as a tool for transforming mobilisation into actual governance.

The Provision of Services and Governance

The transition from mobilisation to governance marks a critical and often challenging phase for any activist movement. It is important to identify the differences between activist movements, the providers of emergency services, and sustainable forms of local governance, and the way this shapes their strategic goals, motivations, and limitations. While the state itself is often a key motivator for change among protesting populations, it can then become the first obstacle to any transition. Entrenched institutions, legacy power networks, and bureaucratic inertia impede the transformation of revolutionary energy into functioning systems of local governance. Even in the case of a regime's removal or collapse, state structures and power dynamics may endure, through the resilience of old elites who exploit familiar networks like clientelism, identity politics, or corporatism to preserve their influence. Assessing the degree of interdependence between state structures and traditional power networks is an important step in planning durable reforms to the system following the removal of a regime.

To overcome these obstacles, a number of key elements can increase the likelihood of a successful transition from activism to local governance. Key among them is the origin of those leading the transition. In Karenni State, Myanmar, the fact that civil society leaders were able to fill the vacuum created by the retreating military forces contributed significantly to the emergence of a participatory form of local governance. The structure of communities themselves also influences the way in which transitions take shape, and this has an impact on their interaction with local, national and international structures. These include financial support and institutional backing, including through political parties, private sector actors, and hybrid arrangements. But funding must be predictable and durable. Expectations, once raised, must be met. Without this, momentum falters, legitimacy erodes, and space opens for more predatory actors. The collapse of many Western donor-funded Local Councils in Syria, and the advance of better-resourced proscribed religious groups, is a stark illustration of this reality.

An engaged and supportive diaspora can channel funding, technical expertise, and connect local struggles to global platforms. Clear strategic goals and methods of governance are important to engage vulnerable communities and communities outside of activist coalitions.

In other instances, activists have chosen a strategy of engagement rather than resistance, working within the system to drive change from inside its structures. Activists in conflict zones, such as Syria and Yemen, have shown that civil society organisations gain credibility when they fill the gaps left by absent governments. In Kurdish communities, local councils organised to provide services and bridge the void created by the government's withdrawal. In Yemen, an evolution was seen within civic movements, as they transitioned from resistance to engagement. Some activists collaborated with governments on security, human rights, and governance, not through accusations, but through constructive recommendations and by identifying 'champions' within institutions. Tribal networks and local mechanisms often proved to be the key to access. However, being able to maintain a group's identity as a genuine resistance movement while working alongside institutions becomes a struggle, and consulting with local communities is absolutely vital for this to occur, especially in the area of service delivery.

In certain contexts, securing negotiations with existing actors in itself constitutes a significant achievement for activist movements. Even in the absence of immediate, tangible outcomes, the act of opening previously closed doors within existing systems can be instrumental in advancing activists' demands.

For civil society, engagement can often be a double bind: maintaining independence from the state while engaging with it sufficiently to shape outcomes. Too close engagement with the state, and it risks co-option; too distant, and it forfeits influence.

The Question of Legitimacy

In many contexts, activists and civic actors encounter hybrid authority structures and multiple systems of power. As civil society steps in to provide services and governance previously performed by the state, what often emerges is not a clean transition, but a contested reordering of authority. Legitimacy is not a static condition; it requires consistent navigation, through the careful application of language, through service delivery, through accountability, and through the use of communication strategies which clearly demonstrate the goals of a movement transitioning from mobilisation to governance.

For activists and civic actors, a key issue is the question of language and differentiation – between protest movements and revolutionary actors, service providers, local governance actors, and traditional systems – which in many cases are unclear.

When civil society steps in to deliver services that the state does not, or cannot, provide, it fills an immediate need but also creates tension. Who is the real provider? Who is accountable when things go wrong? In conditions of scarcity, these questions become more acute, and the absence of clear answers erodes trust. Ambiguity over roles and responsibilities can further fragment already weakened governance spaces, undermining both state and non-state actors.

The risk of armed takeover of movements remains a central concern. Displacing traditional authorities, armed groups often entrench themselves as political elites, reshaping authority in their image. Grassroots structures, largely unarmed and in many cases underfunded, are particularly vulnerable to such coercions. Movements that begin as civic and peaceful can even drift towards armed structures, often to the detriment of the very legitimacy they initially commanded.

Activist movements can succeed in delegitimising the state but leave a power vacuum or political void, one which the military is readily equipped to fill, as was seen in Madagascar. In all such cases, transitions often entrench impunity, granting immunity to those armed elements in power and undermining prospects for accountable governance. Efforts to prioritise stability can lead to the de facto immunity of emerging actors within new power structures, sometimes paving the way for future violence.

When activists enter politics, they are faced by the power of traditional political parties, often organised along sectarian, tribal or ethnic lines. Examples from Bosnia, Iraq and Lebanon highlight this struggle, as individual activists are only able to rise to a certain level of influence before sectarian power networks limit their independence. In Bosnia, the upper echelons of political parties are controlled by ethnic blocs, forcing activist politicians to either align with these traditional parties or forgo the possibility of further influence within the government system. The same can be seen in Iraq and Lebanon, where sectarian interests mediate the ability of activist movements to gain influence in government. In Iraq and Lebanon, traditional political parties have demonstrated the ability to divide and fragment civil society and activist movements, and the consequences of going against traditional political elites can be dangerous and even deadly.

The need for change to be bottom-up, and based on a coalition of local actors, is clear. The ability of different groups within the same context to work together and involve a wide array of actors (civil society organisations, activists, religious figures, local sheikhs, tribal leaders, private sector actors) is crucial to building lasting change. This can in some cases involve finding representatives within an incumbent government who are more sensitive to activists' demands and demonstrate a willingness to provide an entry point into traditional politics.

However, as some examples have shown, it is often more fruitful to focus on the local level and to build coalitions at a district or governorate level, creating the space for activists to still genuinely criticise and challenge state actors at the national level. Importantly, this must still happen alongside communication strategies that utilise the huge outreach capacity of social media to convey the objectives of activist movements to the wider population. Activists do not necessarily need to participate in the government to become political leaders, and in fact there is a fundamental issue when members of protest movements achieve positions of political power but continue to operate within the same state structures as previous regimes. The experience of Yemen offers a cautionary lesson. Former activists gained positions of political power but continued to operate within essentially the same state structures as the regime that they were initially protesting against.



Seminar 2

Comparing Forms of Local Governance in the Presence, or Absence, of the State

On 13 May 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the second session of the *Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars*. The seminar was a continuation of a four-part series aimed at collectively exploring the evolution from activism to governance, culminating in a policy-oriented output. The proposed approach of this initiative is to convene a series of four closed virtual seminars, each building on the previous discussions, with the aim of developing policy-relevant thought leadership and knowledge outputs. The suggested themes of the different sessions are: (i) From Mobilisation to Governance, (ii) Comparing Forms of Local Governance in the Presence, or Absence, of the State, (iii) Transnational Systems, and (iv) Rebuilding Central Governance.

This second seminar focused on governance, both within state structures and beyond or outside them, exploring how legitimacy, accountability, and service delivery are constructed under radically different political conditions. Across the discussions, one theme emerged with particular clarity: the growing disconnect between international systems still largely designed around state-based delivery mechanisms and the reality that, in many conflict-affected contexts, large parts of the population now live under fragmented or contested forms of authority. Participants repeatedly stressed that emerging local governance structures operating in such environments require fundamentally new forms of engagement from international actors.

As with the first seminar, were invited to participate in the closed-session discussion activists from Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, Madagascar, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Yemen and Zambia. The discussions broadly identified two distinct, though sometimes overlapping, pathways of emerging governance:

The first concerns governance within recognised state structures, as illustrated through cases such as Georgia, Lebanon, Madagascar, and Nepal. Here, the challenge was described less as creating governance from scratch than as navigating, reforming, and surviving within existing political systems. Discussions focused on questions of legitimacy, resource allocation, political compromise, implementation capacity, and the difficult transition from activism into governance.

The second pathway concerns governance emerging in contexts where the state has fragmented, withdrawn, or lost legitimacy, including Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. In these contexts, governance emerges less through constitutional design than through necessity, with communities attempting to organise administration, security, justice, humanitarian response, and service delivery amidst ongoing conflict.

The Karenni State case study served as one of the seminar's principal reference points. Participants reflected on the highly adaptive and bottom-up nature of the governance structures emerging there following the 2021 coup in Myanmar. The creation of the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC), followed by the Interim Executive Council (IEC), was presented as an attempt to construct political and administrative systems in parallel with conflict itself, extending from village to state level.

A particularly striking point raised in the discussions was the prioritisation of civilian governance and public services even amidst war. In Karenni State, defence was described as complementary and on par to the establishment of education, healthcare, and administrative systems. Participants also highlighted the complexity of constructing functioning financial and economic mechanisms under conditions of fragmentation, as well as the constant challenge of preserving unity among diverse actors operating under extreme pressure.

Questions of inclusivity featured prominently throughout the seminar. The Karenni experience was discussed as an example of inclusivity pursued less through rigid institutional design than through participation, representation, and the maintenance of open political space. Participants noted the inclusion of civil society, youth, women's organisations, professionals, and armed actors within evolving governance structures, while also recognising that inclusivity remains an ongoing and incomplete process shaped by the realities of active conflict.

The relationship between civilian governance and armed organisations also emerged as a recurring theme. In Karenni State, governance and military structures appear to co-evolve pragmatically rather than exist in strict separation. The discussions underlined that neither side is fully subordinated to the other, but that there remains a stated ambition to move progressively toward civilian oversight and integration.

At the same time, discussions around governance within state structures highlighted a very different set of challenges. The interventions reflect on reformist efforts within the Lebanese political system, focused particularly on the transition from activism into governance and the profound shift in mindset this requires. One of the participants described how activist groups initially sought to build their own ecosystems outside the state, relying on alternative media, NGOs, think tanks, lobby groups, and international networks to increase pressure on political structures and challenge entrenched systems of power.

Yet once reformists entered government, the nature of politics fundamentally changed. Participants reflected on the reality that governance is not simply about demands or ideals, but about implementation, allocation of resources, coalition-building, and negotiation within highly constrained systems. It was repeatedly emphasised that the greatest challenge for activists entering government is no longer protest, but implementation: understanding budgets, laws, bureaucratic procedures, and the individuals responsible for translating policy into practice.

The discussions highlighted how priorities within government are rarely determined solely by principle, but are heavily shaped by political pressure, institutional resistance, and alliances within the bureaucracy. Participants noted that reformists entering government often discover that the "deep state" possesses its own interests, networks, and internal competitions, requiring activists not only to oppose systems, but eventually to engage and negotiate with them.

This transition requires a substantial transformation in organisational culture and political mentality. Several participants stressed that movements built around resistance and protest must eventually reshape themselves into structures capable of governing, negotiating, and surviving politically. Some activists in Lebanon moved into technical working groups designed to engage directly with government institutions, requiring the repositioning not only of activist organisations, but also of relationships with political parties previously viewed solely as adversaries.

A recurring point throughout the discussion was that entering governance often produces fragmentation within activist ecosystems themselves. Once activists enter government, they risk losing public legitimacy precisely because they begin cooperating with the same structures they had previously denounced. Participants observed that reformists can rapidly be perceived as compromised, opportunistic, or absorbed into the system, even when attempting to pursue change from within.

The Lebanese discussion also highlighted the importance of alliances within the bureaucracy itself. Participants stressed that reformist actors cannot implement change without support from within administrative structures and that the true measure of political success becomes not rhetoric, but delivery and implementation. This raised broader questions regarding political culture, including whether systems reward loyalty over competence and whether state institutions promote capable administrators or merely reproduce networks of patronage.

Generational dynamics emerged strongly across several interventions. Both the Karenni and Lebanese discussions suggested that younger activists often appeared more flexible and capable of adapting from protest politics to negotiation and governance, while older generations sometimes remained more deeply shaped by mistrust of state structures and entrenched political resentments.

The discussions also repeatedly returned to the absence of spaces where activists can acquire the technical capacities required for governance. Participants raised the need for structures capable of preparing movements and younger leaders for the practical realities of budgeting, administration, lawmaking, coalition-building, and policy implementation. The question was raised repeatedly, both explicitly and implicitly: where do activists actually learn governance?

The Georgian discussion highlighted another dimension of the transition from activism to governance: the challenge of survival under increasingly repressive political conditions. Participants described Georgian activism as highly fragmented, with weak traditions of democratic dialogue and limited communication between movements operating in different regions. The situation was characterised as a form of “sneaky war” - neither peace nor open conflict - shaped by propaganda, disinformation, repression, and increasing crackdowns on activists and NGOs.

Participants stressed the importance of creating platforms capable of bringing activists into dialogue with one another, as well as the need for physical spaces, organisational support, and financial mechanisms that allow activist networks to survive prolonged periods of repression. The experience of the 2021 Shame Movement was discussed as an example of both the strengths and vulnerabilities of contemporary activism. While the movement demonstrated remarkable organisational capacity and fundraising ability, participants noted that it exhausted itself within months, eventually transitioning into an NGO structure before facing increasing repression from the authorities.

The Georgian discussion also raised broader questions regarding the role of international funding. Participants observed that foreign-funded NGOs often operate within constraints that limit direct political engagement, creating tensions between activism, advocacy, and political transformation. This issue was identified as one that may require further exploration in the third seminar, particularly regarding how external funding can unintentionally depoliticise movements or constrain their strategic choices.

Questions raised by participants further broadened the discussion to include exile, burnout, organisational exhaustion, and the pressures imposed both by state repression and by public expectations. Participants noted that activist movements are often treated by populations as alternative governments long before they possess the structures or resources to govern, contributing to exhaustion, fragmentation, and burnout among organisers. In several contexts, activists now face not only repression but outright criminalisation.

The discussions also repeatedly returned to the question of legitimacy. One of the more striking comparative conclusions was that governance outside the state often derives legitimacy less from legality than from responsiveness, participation, and demonstrated utility. In Karenni State, legitimacy for taxation and governance appears to rest not on formal legal authority, but on visible service delivery, local participation, proximity to communities, and a shared understanding that governance structures form part of a collective resistance effort. Legitimacy, in this sense, is earned through function rather than imposed through law.

Conversely, participants noted that governance within the state often possesses formal legality while suffering from declining public legitimacy. Several contributors observed that once activists enter government, they rapidly become associated with the failures and dysfunctions of the state itself, often leading to the erosion of public support.

The role of diaspora communities was also identified as an important area requiring further exploration, particularly the distinction between diaspora actors operating “inside” versus “outside” political processes and the different forms of influence, support, and pressure they exert.

The discussions furthermore suggested that many of these governance experiments remain highly transitional and fragile. Yet they also point toward a broader transformation in how political authority is organised and legitimised in an increasingly fragmented world. More fundamentally, the seminar raised the possibility that governance is progressively becoming less tied to formal state structures alone and more dependent on the ability of institutions, formal or informal, to demonstrate responsiveness, participation, and practical effectiveness.

For international actors, the central question increasingly appears no longer whether to engage with such emerging forms of governance, but how to do so without distorting, depoliticising, or undermining the local processes underway.

Seminar 3

‘Diaspora, Transitional Justice and the Politics of Legitimacy’

Introduction

On 07 July 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the third session of the Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars. The series consists of four seminars aimed at collectively exploring the evolution from activism to governance, culminating in a policy brief.

The third seminar built upon themes that had emerged throughout the previous discussions. Having explored the mobilisation of activist movements and their transition towards local governance, participants turned to two cross-cutting issues that repeatedly surfaced across different country experiences: the role of diaspora communities and the challenge of transitional justice. Although often examined separately, both ultimately revolved around the same underlying question: who possesses the legitimacy to shape political futures in societies experiencing conflict, fragmentation and political transition?

Rather than seeking universal answers, participants explored how legitimacy is continually negotiated between those who remain, those who leave, and those attempting to rebuild institutions amidst ongoing conflict. In doing so, the discussion challenged conventional assumptions about exile and return, justice and reconciliation, and the relationship between activism, governance and political transformation.

Diaspora: Living Between Home and Abroad

Participants stressed that diaspora communities should not be understood as coherent political actors. Diasporas are diverse and evolving communities whose identities change over time as individuals acquire new citizenships, establish new social networks and redefine their relationships with their countries of origin.

Yet despite this diversity, participants repeatedly returned to the notion of diaspora as occupying an "in-between" political space—neither fully belonging to their adopted societies nor entirely detached from the countries they left. This liminal position creates both unique opportunities and significant tensions.

Operating outside the immediate constraints of authoritarian rule or armed conflict often gives diaspora communities greater freedom to organise politically, mobilise support and engage international actors. At the same time, geographical and social distance can produce different political realities from those experienced by activists working inside conflict-affected societies. Participants also recognised that diaspora communities can themselves become marginalised in new spaces. In some cases, such as the Kurdish diaspora, this could translate into renewed activism focused on raising awareness and organising protests, rather than engaging in more substantive forms of political work.

Several participants observed that political innovation frequently emerges from younger generations living abroad. Student movements have historically provided spaces where young activists encounter alternative political systems while interacting with other diaspora communities confronting similar struggles. New political ideas therefore often develop not simply through exposure to host countries but through exchanges across different diasporas, leading participants to question whether diaspora activism should always be viewed as distinct from activism occurring within countries themselves.

Beyond Remittances: From Financing Activism to Supporting Governance

Although the discussion moved well beyond the traditional focus on remittances and financial support, participants acknowledged that diaspora funding has historically played an indispensable role in sustaining activist movements. The Kurdish experience was cited as an example where diaspora networks provided the financial infrastructure that enabled political mobilisation long before formal governance institutions emerged.

However, an important distinction emerged between financing activism and financing governance. Activist movements can often survive through voluntary contributions and international solidarity. Governing institutions cannot. They ultimately depend upon predictable domestic revenue, taxation and a legitimate social contract with the populations they serve. As movements evolve into governing authorities, their relationship with diaspora funding necessarily changes.

Participants also cautioned that external funding can unintentionally reinforce local inequalities. Different diaspora communities may support competing political, ethnic or regional constituencies, thereby reproducing fragmentation rather than overcoming it. The Kurdish experience illustrated how remittances could contribute to unequal access to education, technical skills and political influence among communities with differing access to relatives abroad. Participants noted that such dynamics could give rise to a kind of 'red bourgeoisie': individuals based abroad who, by virtue of the time and resources they were able to devote to activism, came to occupy increasingly prominent positions within movements. At the same time, this could have the more positive effect of allowing those with technical skills to remain within the country, reducing brain drain.

Several participants also questioned whether international funding channelled through diaspora organisations always reflected local priorities. Drawing upon Syrian experience, one participant noted that donor-driven funding sometimes prioritised issues that resonated internationally while communities continued struggling to meet far more immediate needs. Such dynamics raise broader questions about the independence and accountability of civil society organisations operating between international donors and local communities.

Many therefore argued that the diaspora's greatest comparative advantage lies not simply in financing activism, but in connecting local experiences to international policy debates. Greater freedom of movement, political access and communications infrastructure enable diaspora communities to elevate local voices into international policy spaces, influence diplomatic discussions and advocate for communities that often struggle to make themselves heard internationally.

The SARS movement in Nigeria was raised as an illustrative case: while the visibility generated by diaspora artists and public figures in the UK and US brought valuable international attention, participants suggested that longer-term impact was ultimately determined by those diaspora members who sustained their commitment and dedicated time to political action at home.

Representation, Polarisation and Return

Participants noted growing efforts in several African countries to create parliamentary representation for diaspora communities and to involve diaspora actors in Presidential Delivery Units responsible for implementing political programmes. While such initiatives recognise the continuing importance of diaspora engagement, they also expose difficult questions of representation. Diasporas themselves are politically fragmented, socially diverse and geographically dispersed. No single representative can easily claim to speak on behalf of such varied constituencies.

The question of polarisation between diaspora and actors on the ground also emerged. Participants cautioned that differing experiences can create tensions. Those living abroad may underestimate the compromises required by those operating under conditions of violence or authoritarianism. Conversely, local actors may question the legitimacy of those advocating political change from abroad.

Examples from Myanmar illustrated these dilemmas clearly. While civil society leaders inside the country increasingly sought ways to reduce violence and create political space for negotiation, parts of the diaspora rejected such approaches, favouring more uncompromising positions. The Syrian case offered a further example: diaspora networks played an important role in supporting civil society since 2011, but the fall of the regime and continuing human rights violations against different communities deepened tensions and divisions. Diaspora groups were said to have at times contributed to political polarisation through hate speech or the promotion of contested narratives. Participants observed that diaspora communities can sometimes develop political realities that become increasingly detached from rapidly evolving conditions on the ground, shaped more by the political environment of the countries in which they now live rather than by the actual needs of communities at home.

Participants also highlighted the growing vulnerability of diaspora communities to organised misinformation campaigns. Large and politically influential diaspora populations increasingly become targets of external actors seeking to shape electoral outcomes, influence public opinion or deepen political polarisation. Experiences from Armenia illustrated how diaspora communities can themselves become arenas of geopolitical competition, while social media often amplifies conflicts that have become considerably more nuanced on the ground. Similarly, participants noted that Russian disinformation actors have sought to amplify conflicting narratives circulating between Israeli and Palestinian perspectives within Muslim diaspora communities, not out of any genuine investment in either position but specifically in order to fuel conflict and division.

The question of return generated particularly rich discussion. Participants observed that political transitions frequently expose tensions between those who remained throughout conflict and those returning after years abroad, often possessing greater educational opportunities, international experience or financial resources. While returnees may contribute valuable skills and perspectives, they may also encounter resentment from communities that bore the direct costs of conflict and resistance.

Examples from Madagascar, South Africa and Rwanda illustrated that successful reintegration requires managing expectations on both sides if new inequalities are not to undermine political transitions.

Finally, participants noted that diaspora influence extends well beyond politics and finance. Through music, language, food and cultural production, diaspora communities increasingly shape international narratives about conflict and identity. While this can strengthen international solidarity, participants also cautioned against forms of cultural representation that unintentionally marginalise local voices or substitute external interpretations for lived experience.

Eventually, there can be no single model for understanding diaspora engagement. Their influence depends not only on the willingness of diaspora communities to remain engaged, but equally on the willingness of domestic actors to integrate them into emerging political processes.

Transitional Justice Beyond the Post-Conflict Paradigm

The second part of the session challenged one of the central assumptions underpinning conventional approaches to transitional justice: that justice begins only after conflict ends. Participants argued that this increasingly fails to reflect political reality. Across many contemporary conflicts, fragmented authority, recurring violence and prolonged instability mean that societies attempt simultaneously to govern, negotiate and pursue accountability while conflict continues.

Transition is therefore no longer a clearly identifiable moment separating war from peace. Rather, it has become a prolonged and contested political process. This raises fundamental questions. Should justice wait until conflict has ended? Or should accountability begin even while violence persists?

Drawing upon experiences from Syria, Afghanistan, Rwanda and South Africa, participants largely rejected the notion that transitional justice should simply be postponed until ideal political conditions emerge. Indeed, several argued that ongoing conflict often demonstrates precisely why more inclusive justice processes are required.

As one participant observed, conflict should not only be viewed as an obstacle to justice but also as evidence that grievances remain unresolved and that justice mechanisms require strengthening rather than postponement.

Justice, Stability and Political Reality

Participants revisited the longstanding tension between political stability and accountability.

Afghanistan was discussed as an example where international actors prioritised short-term political stability by incorporating warlords into emerging political institutions. While this facilitated an immediate political settlement, participants argued that it simultaneously entrenched systems of power that later made meaningful accountability almost impossible. This prompted broader reflection on whether justice delayed ultimately becomes justice denied.

Several participants cautioned against presenting stability and justice as competing objectives. Rather, failure to address structural injustices early may itself undermine long-term political stability.

Whose Justice?

Participants also explored the political nature of accountability itself. The Syrian experience illustrated how deeply contested questions of justice remain. Communities often disagree fundamentally about who should be considered victims, perpetrators or even heroes. A figure regarded by one community as responsible for atrocities may simultaneously be viewed by another as a martyr or defender.

This raises difficult questions about whether transitional justice should focus exclusively on former regimes or encompass violations committed by all actors, including armed groups, extremist organisations and those who economically benefited from conflict.

Several participants argued that acknowledgement itself represents an important form of justice. Calling massacres by their proper name, documenting violations and recognising victims publicly may constitute essential first steps even where broader accountability mechanisms remain politically unattainable.

Participants further distinguished between establishing an absolute historical truth and developing a sufficiently shared understanding of the past to enable communities to live together again. One participant reflected that while absolute truth may remain elusive, societies can still construct forms of shared truth capable of supporting coexistence.

Justice, Reconciliation and Community Healing

Perhaps the strongest consensus emerged around the relationship between accountability and reconciliation.

Participants rejected the idea that these represent competing objectives. Rather, they were viewed as mutually reinforcing elements of broader social transformation.

The South African experience illustrated both the possibilities and limitations of this approach. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission transformed international thinking about transitional justice, participants observed that continuing economic inequality, xenophobia and unresolved historical grievances demonstrate that democratic transition remains an ongoing process rather than a completed event. Several argued that psychological healing and material reparations had never been fully achieved, allowing unresolved trauma to re-emerge decades later.

Participants similarly reflected on Rwanda's experience, particularly the challenges associated with the return of diaspora communities and the long-term social consequences that continue to evolve.

Across cases, participants argued that transitional justice extends well beyond criminal prosecution. Documentation, truth-telling, community dialogue, institutional reform, memorialisation, reparations and psychological healing all constitute essential components of rebuilding trust.

Particular emphasis was placed on locally owned dialogue processes that enable multiple experiences and narratives to emerge. Participants cautioned that internationally designed justice frameworks can unintentionally privilege formal legal approaches while overlooking local traditions through which communities remember violence, process trauma and rebuild relationships. Rich stories of healing may therefore become lost as complex lived experiences are translated into standardised international concepts of justice. Relatedly, participants observed that younger generations do not always inherit knowledge of the specific mechanisms once put in place to support healing among survivors of genocide and mass violence, meaning that hard-won lessons risk being lost over time. Sustaining this knowledge across generations and keeping dialogue spaces open was seen as essential to preserving a shared ambition for a stable and harmonious society.

Participants also highlighted practical entry points capable of building trust across political and sectarian divides. Support for survivors of gender-based violence, families of the disappeared, former political detainees, displaced communities and children affected by conflict were all cited as examples of areas where dialogue may begin despite continuing political disagreement.

Ultimately, participants argued that transitional justice exists to serve society rather than political institutions. Sustainable reconciliation therefore depends upon creating locally owned spaces where disagreement can be expressed, different experiences acknowledged and the structural causes of conflict openly examined.

Emerging Reflections

Several overarching conclusions emerged across both discussions.

First, legitimacy remains fundamentally relational. Whether discussing diaspora engagement or transitional justice, participants consistently argued that political authority cannot simply be claimed through military victory, financial resources or international recognition. It must be continually negotiated with the communities most directly affected.

Second, contemporary political transitions are increasingly non-linear. Governance, conflict, justice, activism and reconciliation now unfold simultaneously rather than sequentially, requiring approaches that are adaptive rather than based on assumptions of a clear progression from war to peace.

Third, local ownership emerged as a recurring principle. International actors and diaspora communities can play indispensable supporting roles, but durable governance and meaningful reconciliation ultimately depend upon locally legitimate institutions and processes shaped by those living the realities of conflict.

Finally, participants reflected that the seminar series itself represents something different from many conventional policy discussions. Rather than providing a snapshot of individual country experiences, it has begun to reveal a broader trajectory across diverse contexts. As conflicts become increasingly protracted and state authority more fragmented, new forms of governance are emerging from below, driven largely by younger generations, civil society and local communities. These realities remain insufficiently reflected in international policy debates, which continue to focus predominantly on humanitarian delivery and formal political settlements.

Bridging these two conversations—the lived realities of local governance and the priorities of international policy—may ultimately prove one of the most significant contributions of the network emerging from this initiative. These reflections will provide an important foundation for the fourth and final seminar, which will explore how the lessons emerging across the series can contribute to the development of a broader international network on activism and local governance.

