

Research Statement

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In my research, I explore the characteristics and impacts of state building in fragile and weak states, a setting where empirical evidence is scarce and existing theories offer competing hypotheses. Informed by fieldwork and qualitative interviews, I combine large and novel datasets with a variety of methods to identify causal relationships. Throughout my research I study the consequences of state building on local power dynamics involving non-state actors, state agents, and citizens and evaluate ways in which our knowledge of these processes can help us improve state building. Specifically, my dissertation and other research projects study i) the role of non-state actors in state building processes, ii) how state agents might be hindering state building and bottom-up as well as top-down interventions to improve their performance and iii) the long-term effects of historical state building efforts.

Dissertation: traditional leaders and state building in Africa

In my dissertation, I focus on the role of traditional leaders in the African state building process. Traditional leaders are highly influential across the developing world by shaping local politics and economic behavior. Yet, how they interact with the state and help or hinder in the state building process remains poorly understood. I develop a theory under which institutional linkages between the state and traditional leaders play an important role in determining how changes in state capacity affect traditional leaders. Institutionalizing traditional leaders makes their power complementary to that of the central state due to resource dependencies, and shared credit and blame attribution. However, when chiefs are institutionally separated from the state, their power acts as a substitute to state power as both compete locally for resources and legitimacy.

I outline this theoretical argument and test its implications in my job market paper. Using geocoded data from 5,500 administrative units in 25 countries and comparing respondents at the borders of neighboring districts, I obtain quasi-random variation in their distance to local headquarters of the central state, which I validate as an adequate measure of local state capacity. This regression discontinuity design and supporting qualitative interviews show that in countries where traditional leaders are institutionally linked to the state — measured by whether the constitution assigns them a formal role — traditional leaders are less influential farther away from headquarters of the central state. In contrast, when they are institutionally separated, their power increases as local state capacity decreases. The results shed light on why traditional leaders remain influential during certain state building processes and not others and why state failure does not impact chiefs homogeneously.

In my dissertation book project I further develop the idea of traditional leaders as key actors in African state building. I theoretically and empirically investigate the decision of African

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states to institutionally incorporate chiefs as well as its consequences for the influence of traditional leaders, state building, and rural welfare. In addition to the empirical analysis in my job market paper, I provide further evidence from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and the DRC. The empirical evidence is bolstered by two in-depth case studies of how institutional arrangements between the state and traditional leaders were formed in Ghana and Nigeria.

Other Projects

To complement my dissertation, I am working on coauthored projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mexico, and Nigeria, each extending my dissertation by focusing on a different aspects of state building and its interaction with non-state actors or state agents.

Additional evidence on the state-chief relationship

My dissertation reveals that state building requires rulers to make important trade-offs when dealing with non-state actors. In a project with Raul Sanchez de la Sierra and Gauthier Marchais, we investigate the ruler-chief relationship in a new setting and with original data. Specifically, we study when armed groups in the Eastern DRC govern via the local chief (indirect rule), and what consequences this institutional setup has for the local relationship between the population and its chief. We find that armed groups are more likely to co-opt chiefs when chiefs have more local authority, as measured by their coethnicity. They also rely on indirect rule when the armed group lacks legitimacy among the population, as also measured by their coethnicity. The use of direct rule increases with an armed group's tenure and the resources of the village. We use survey data and implicit association tests to estimate the effects of indirect rule. We show that indirect rule decreases legitimacy of chiefs. Armed groups, however, increase their legitimacy by delegating power to the chiefs.

The role of state actors in state building

In a second project in the DRC, Laura Paler, Wilson Prichard, Cyrus Samii, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra and I look at the role of state agents when state building fails. We aim to characterize the kleptocratic system of the country, where state agents abuse citizens, citizens evade taxes, and the state lacks resources to provide public goods and pay its agents. We then test randomized interventions to improve local governance by affecting the balance of power between administrators and households. To overcome difficulties in measuring taxes and bribes, we develop a smartphone application and train 300 households and businesses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to report all payments weekly for 5 months. Our results show that empowered citizens can circumvent the kleptocratic state equilibrium. The tax consulting and protection treatments empower respondents, especially unregistered firms, to engage with the tax collectors. Respondents report paying less bribes and a lengthier negotiation with state agents. Moreover, the treatment induced more interactions with state officials and increased the amount of formal taxes paid.

While the DRC project studies a bottom-up approach of improving the state building role of state agents, my work with Horacio Larreguy and John Marshall in Mexico investigates a more top-down attempt to improve state building on a larger scale. We study the effects of a Mexican federal program designed to incentivize municipal governments to support sustained and inclusive municipal economic and environmental development by certifying state capacity and public goods provision across 39 indicators. Our difference-in-differences estimates indicate that entry into the program quickly produced large, positive effects on actual state capacity outcomes. Nevertheless, we also find evidence of political manipulation: municipal governments politically aligned with the state governments—which are largely responsible for the implementation of the program—and in more competitive electoral races are able to game the system and earn higher scores without actually improving state capacity outcomes.

Historical state building

Finally, Horacio Larreguy and I also study a historical instance of state building. Specifically, we examine the long term effects of colonial state building policies in Nigeria by analyzing how historical missionary activities still affect contemporary outcomes. Using a geographic regression discontinuity design we compare areas where the colonial state encouraged missionary activities to areas where it did not. Results indicate that colonial state building had a positive and large long-run effect on religion conversion, educational outcomes, health provision, consumption of durable goods, housing characteristics and occupation. We explain the lasting impact of the policy experiment by the persistence in the private provision of education which, as a result of the policy, substituted for missing public provision of education. The paper also provides evidence for the importance of continuous state building. The gap between treated and non treated areas is closing over time due to the reversion of the lack of public provision of education.

Future Research

In the coming years, I will continue pursuing my research agenda on state building in developing countries. In particular, I will continue work on my dissertation book project on the role of traditional leaders in African state building. Alongside, I will work on articles on the projects described above. Data collection for all of them is complete, and the papers are in varying stages. I am also undertaking a project investigating the effects of hostile non-state actors - Mexican drug cartels - in the state building process. Horacio Larreguy, John Marshall and I have finished data collection and validated an identification strategy to study the effects of drug-related violence on state capacity in Mexico. I also plan to further examine how states outsource the state building process by looking at the political processes of decentralization reform in Sub-Saharan Africa (with Carl Mueller-Crepon). Finally, I am keen to continue data collection in the DRC to better understand the incentives that motivate state agents and non-state actors in an environment of failed state building.