Limited Statehood

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Limited Statehood: How Armed Groups Fill Governance Gaps in Sub-Saharan Africa

When state authority is weak or absent, armed groups may seize the opportunity not only to fight national authorities, but also to create rules, tax civilians, regulate behaviour, impose their own concept of justice, and act as de facto governments claiming authority over civilian life. This situation is closely linked to the concept of limited statehood, where the state formally exists but cannot fully enforce its authority across all its territory. The following sections define limited statehood, examine why it emerges, and discuss how governance can be sustained when state authority is weak.

What Is Limited Statehood?

In general terms, areas of limited statehood are places where the formal state exists and retains de jure authority, but its institutions are unable to fully enforce political decisions or maintain a monopoly over the use of violence. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this problem is especially visible in peripheral, rural, and borderland territories where the state's presence is limited or contested. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria illustrate how armed groups can exploit weak territorial control, local disputes, and social grievances to gain influence, establish operational bases, and recruit new members.

Why Does Limited Statehood Emerge?

Limited statehood emerges when formal institutions lack the capacity, legitimacy, or territorial reach to impose order. In such contexts, governance does not simply disappear. Instead, it may be performed by actors with de facto coercive capacity. Armed groups can benefit from illegal economies, difficult terrain, weak state monitoring and local grievances to present themselves as alternative sources of authority.

Limited statehood matters because armed groups do not rely on violence alone. Their influence may also depend on taxation, dispute resolution, protection, and social control. Limited statehood therefore shifts the analy-

sis from seeing armed groups only as terrorist actors to understanding them as competitors for political authority.

Government Responses in Areas of Limited Statehood

The key question is how governance can be sustained where statehood is limited. In Sahelian states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, military responses alone are insufficient. Governance also depends on coordination between local authorities, state representatives, civil society, and international actors. These networks can help provide security, justice, and welfare where the state is weak. However, if this coordination fails, rebel groups can exploit the vacuum by imposing rules and claiming authority over civilian life.

Conclusion

Limited statehood shows that armed conflict is also a struggle over governance. Where the state cannot provide order, armed groups may gain authority by combining coercion with taxation, justice, and protection. Effective responses therefore require rebuilding state legitimacy and local coordination, not only military pressure.

Further readings

Risse, T., & Lehmkuhl, U. (2006). *Governance in areas of limited statehood: New modes of governance?* (SFB-Governance Working Paper Series No. 1). Collaborative Research Center 700. https://www.sfb-governance.de/en/publikationen/sfb-700-working_papers/wp1/index.html