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 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) how state building might affect conflict dynamics and how they can be mitigated.

My job market paper is in the second round of Revise and Resubmit at the American Political Science Review. I have five additional papers under review and four additional ongoing projects which are supported by over 2 million dollars in funding. In the remainder of this research statement I discuss the projects I have under review, where I am headed next, and how these projects collectively contribute to a broader research agenda seeking to understand the relationship between institutions and politics in Africa.

Traditional Leaders and state building in Africa

In the first strand of my research agenda, 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 whether they 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, which is in the second round of **Revise and Resubmit at the American Political Science Review**. 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

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— 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. The latest version can be found here.

My findings and the literature on traditional leaders raise the question of when do states decide to govern via traditional leaders and what are the advantages or disadvantages of such modes of governance. I have been studying these questions during my post-doc at the University of Chicago with a graduate student, Vincent Tanutama. We have obtained $150,000 from the International Growth Centre to study decentralization reform in the DRC. We are surveying 108 localities in the Eastern DRC, half of which are governed by state authorities, and the other half by traditional chiefs. Using a population threshold to identify the switch from traditional governance to state control, our project aims to assess the effects of different governance systems on economic development, accountability, and legitimacy.

My research reveals that state building requires rulers to make important trade-offs when dealing with non-state actors. In a project with Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra University of Chicago) and Gauthier Marchais (IDS), 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 and they also rely on indirect rule when the armed group lacks legitimacy among the population. The use of direct rule increases with an armed group's tenure and the resources of the village. Using survey data and implicit association tests to estimate the effects of indirect rule, we then show that indirect rule decreases legitimacy of chiefs. Armed groups, however, increase their legitimacy by delegating power to the chiefs.

Assessing the impact of state building interventions

In addition to my research on traditional leaders, I also work extensively on different types of state building interventions and aim to assess their impact on development and political outcomes.

My work with Horacio Larreguy (ITAM) and John Marshall (Columbia) in Mexico investigates a top-down attempt to improve state building on a larger scale. We first provide a formal model that argues that politicians often underprovide public goods due to adverse selection and short-term unobservability of investments. We then 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. Difference-in-differences estimates show that the program did not ultimately improve municipal public service delivery on average. Consistent with our model, this effect is only positive when the institution responsible for

oversight of the program is unlikely to be corruptible and when the likelihood that the incumbent is not corruptible in producing the service is large. These findings highlight the challenges in top-down state building and the importance of incentive-compatible monitoring. The paper is currently under review and the latest version can be found here.

While the Mexican project studies a top-down approach of improving state building, in a second project in the DRC, Laura Paler (American), Wilson Prichard (Toronto), Cyrus Samii (NYU), Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra and I look at the role of state agents when state building fails and evaluate a bottom-up approach of improving it. We present a formal model that builds upon descriptive data from an original survey that shows legal and illegal payments are complements rather than substitutes and how citizens have to decide whether to make themselves visible to the state and, if visible, to collude with state agents to avoid a legal payment. 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. The pre-analysis plan can be found here and we are in the process of writing up the results.

Horacio Larreguy, Carlos Schmidt-Padilla (Stanford), and I also study a historical instance of state building. Specifically, we examine the long term effects of colonial state building policies in Sub-Saharan Africa by analyzing how historical missionary activities shape long-run education and political development. Using a geographic regression discontinuity design we compare villages close to their historical Catholic diocese's headquarters to villages from them. We show that such proximity led to increased presence of Catholic missionaries and has long-term positive effects on Catholic identification and educational outcomes. In line with recent literature, the effects on political outcomes depend on regime type. Only individuals exposed to greater historical missionary activity in open anocracies — relative to those in democracies and closed anocracies — are more likely to participate in politics. Only these individuals are all more sophisticated, supportive of democratic institutions, and disenchanted with the state of democracy and the incumbent in their countries. The paper is currently under review and the latest version can be found here.

State building and conflict

A crucial step of building a functioning state is establishing the monopoly of violence. In a third strand of research I investigate how state building and conflict interact.

In a working paper with Christian Mastaki Mugaruka (Marakuja Research), Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra, Miguel Ortiz (Berkeley), and David Qihang Wu (Berkeley) we study the attempts by a weak state to assert its monopoly of violence. A common feature of weak states is that they do not even control their territory, enabling non-state armed actors to hold a monopoly of violence and taxation in some areas, instead of arbitrarily expropriating. Attempts by the state to regain its monopoly of violence can disrupt this equilibrium. We examine this hypothesis by combining information on the behavior of armed actors in 239 municipalities of

eastern DRC with quasi-experimental variation induced by one of the largest military efforts to regain the state's monopoly of violence in 2009. The campaign successfully dismantled the armed actors' monopoly of violence in the targeted villages, but the yearly incidence of attacks by the targeted armed actors against those villages increased from 9% to 33% for at least three years. We provide suggestive evidence that the effect reflects a disruption in the targeted armed actor taxation. The results suggest that building monopolies of violence by force, a key process in the creation of European modern states and a common justification for military support of weak states, can create predatory roving bandits and decrease the welfare of citizens. The paper is currently under review and the latest version can be found here.

State building often involves the occupation of new territories and the subjugation of different populations. Together with Connor Huff, I investigate how atrocities committed by a colonial power can lead to conflict down the line. We argue that past atrocities shape local grievances and economic incentives. Increasing grievances make individuals more likely to rebel, and less likely to fight for the perpetrator. When organizations use material incentives to recruit, worsening economic conditions increase the incentives to fight. We study how the atrocity of the 1845–1849 Great Famine affected whether Irishmen fought for or against Britain. Leveraging data on over 150,000 Irish combatants, we show that individuals in places more severely affected by the Famine fought in the pro-British Irish Militia and the WWI British military at lower rates. However, they rebelled against Britain at higher rates. We thus demonstrate how oppressive state building can have long run implications for conflict. The paper is currently under review and the latest version can be found here.

In the absence of a functioning state, economic disputes can lead to violent conflict if Coasian bargaining breaks down. Together with Oeindrila Dube (University of Chicago) and James Robinson (University of Chicago), we investigate the nature of the endemic farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria and whether "contact" can help resolve them. The Contact Hypothesis postulates that contact between groups can resolve conflicts, yet there is little causal evidence on conflict outcomes and potential mechanisms. Our study, for which we have received close to $2 million in funding, will provide the first field experimental micro evidence on whether, and how, contact influences violent conflict. In collaboration with an NGO, we are conducting an RCT that convenes inter-dialogues with farmers and herders in 288 communities. Thus, we aim to assess whether, in the absence of a functioning state, civil society and local communities can come together and build institutions to reduce conflict.

The future of African state building: Local solutions

Throughout my research, I have focused on local governance solutions, such as traditional leaders and local civil society organizations, to address state building challenges. In my latest working paper, James Robinson and I describe one possible future for African state building. We identify three latent assets in African societies: meritocracy, cosmopolitanism, and skepticism towards authority. We provide rich historical and anthropological evidence for these assets and show how they shape behavior and attitudes today. We then outline how harnessing them and developing homegrown African solutions can propel the continent forward. The paper is under review and the latest version can be found here.