



**SID**

Society for International Development

**SID-NL Lecture Series 2011-2012**

**“The State in a Globalizing World.  
Problematic, yet indispensable”**

---

First lecture: **The role of the state in the development process: Notes from Africa**



On Monday 14 November 2011, **Stephen Ellis**, Senior researcher at the African Studies Centre and Desmond Tutu professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the VU University Amsterdam, held the first lecture in the 2011-2012 SID-NL Lecture Series, ‘The State in a Globalizing World’.

### **Summary**

We are living in a time of extraordinary turbulence. We are living through what is in fact the third currency war of the last hundred years. The first currency war in the 1920s led to the Great Depression and the second World War, the second currency war in the 1970s was one of the reasons behind the fall of Soviet Union, now what will the third one lead to? It is clear that we can expect major changes; a new area is now emerging.

Ellis makes a few remarks on this subject from his point of view as an African historian. The number of the states in the world has grown by 400% in less than seventy years. The main reason behind this is the breakup of the European colonial empire and the dissolution of the Russian empire. These new countries were not blank at de-colonization; they come with a history and their own expectations, which are quite different from the experience of Europe. According to the UN, many of these states are failing states. However, five of the twelve fastest growing economies are in Africa, and the business-world considers Africa as a dynamic frontier market. The reason for this robust economic growth includes the rising demand created by an expanding population; in the last century, Africa has had the fastest population growth in the entire history of the world. Aside from this, financial articulation has improved greatly. This is partly because of economic and financial reforms carried out in the 1990s which has led to less poverty and a growing middle class.

How can we understand this paradox of failing states and dynamic growth? Ellis argues that our responses to this question have to be considerably more nuanced than they have been in the past. The most common response has been African optimism, often based on the belief that increased democratization has caused improvement. Another response, African pessimism, usually focuses on the loss of bureaucratic efficient states. Neither of these responses on the global level is a helpful way of looking at things, because you can pick out promising and less promising aspects. The best way to answer this question is to take into account the great disparity of African experiences; the types of government and the different experiences of economic growth. What we need to do is to discern the characteristics of an emerging new world; we should not just think about Africa, but about the world as a whole. Nevertheless, by looking at Africa, we can learn to understand contradictories in much unknown quantities like the concept of a successful failed state such as Angola.

According to Ellis, there are five important emerging trends, when looking at the changing role of the state in Africa in particular:

1. Western hegemony in understanding societies does no longer exists. We cannot consider the European history as a guideline for setting rules of development. While we can sustain our own model, we must be more attentive to worldwide, non-Western, models.
2. Although the US remains by far the most powerful country in the world, its ability to affect outcomes by military or other means is becoming more restricted. Other states like China are now a counter-power, given its major commercial and political interests.
3. Financial instability will remain an important factor at least for the foreseeable future. One of the consequences is that wealthy people all over the world are trying to export their money to what they think might be save locations.
4. About 80% of underused farmland can be found in Africa, and huge land investments are currently taking place. In order to feed the growing world population, we need to cultivate more land. Therefore, we need to look at the possibilities to understand the world we are coming to.
5. There is an increasing mix of politics and crime as states come under the control of people who use criminal methods and who may have roots in organized crime. All political systems have three essential aspects: representation, exchange of goods and services, and coercion. Ellis indicates that these aspects also apply to the most successful criminal operations, which makes it difficult to spot the differences.

When looking at emerging trends in light of development, Ellis states that when the world was being remade on the bases of sovereign nation states, the state itself was regarded as the basis of development. The state has been expected to provide an environment in which the private sector can do their work; its role in regulation is indisputable. But the notion of the developmental state is now disappearing; on the one hand we want the state to stimulate development for citizens, but on the other hand we have expectations of the state to participate internationally in order to, for example, safeguard public goods. What in many aspects seems to be emerging is that states develop into market states, a state that regulates markets, instead of states providing welfare services. You see this model all over the world, even in countries like Angola and Nigeria.

There are two main questions to which Ellis has no answer: How will market states deal with high unemployment which now exists all over the world, and what will be the relationship between fragile and stable states. In other words what do we do with Afghanistan or Somalia?

### **Discussion with the audience**

Ellis is being asked why he sees South Sudan as a fragile state. Ellis replies that South Sudan is just recently created and has extremely limited bureaucratic capability as yet, to fulfil the legal obligation of a sovereign state. On the other hand, when comparing South Sudan with other African states, who also had poor bureaucratic capabilities at independence, South Sudan has enormous diaspora in particular in the United States, making the whole context quite different from anywhere else in Africa.

Another member from the audience was wondering what Ellis' recommendation would be for African states. He indicates that the single most important thing is that African elites, including intellectuals, have to be more aware of the structure of their own continent. A

problem is the collapse of African universities that serve as physical and social infrastructure where people can actually think seriously about their own situation with regard to the world they live in. Ellis emphasizes that you cannot liberate yourself politically until you start thinking right. A lack of intellectual confidence makes African politicians project themselves internationally and even in their own countries as victims of neo-colonialism.

When asked to what extent the state in Africa is able to bring the national identity back in a multi-ethnic society, Ellis comments that people both in Europe and Africa misunderstand what ethnicity is. People very often think that Africa is divided into a large number of tribes or ethnic groups, that comprised mini-nations, which were randomly divided into 50 territories by the Europeans. This concept of ethnicity is quite untrue. It is true that there were certain groups in Africa that were culturally connected, but they were at constant war with each other. Having similar cultural traits as someone else does not automatically political unity. It is thus incorrect to think of self-governing ethnic groups who were randomly separated or forced together in one area. Groups have grown within these new boundaries and today's nationalism is completely inseparable from ethnic identity.

Towards the end of the discussion, someone in the audience questioned national sovereignty of states in the context of today's world. On the one hand we see growing democratization processes, while on the other hand many frameworks such as international agreements and a market doctrine limit the decision-making space of the state. To what extent is this undermining the stability of the states against the claim of the greater democratic say of the citizens, for example in Africa? Where is national sovereignty today? Ellis states that since the financial revolution in 1970, there is no state in the world with real sovereignty. A new generation has emerged with new types of political claims, which we may consider more democratic, but the idea of classic democracy is gone.

