**Cumulative Influence:**

**The Case of Political Settlements Research in British Policy**

**Introduction**

By 2010, the concept of the political settlement had risen to occupy a central place in British policy toward conflict-affected and fragile states. Yet, only ten years earlier, at around the turn of the millennium, the term was barely mentioned in official circles and the so-called ‘good governance’ approach – which represented a very different understanding of and response to the problem of instability, weak government and conflict in developing countries – held sway as the dominant operational mode. So, how had this fundamental transformation of policy approach come about and what was the role of research in this process?

In this article we demonstrate that research did indeed play a central role in generating policy change and primarily through a process of what we term ‘cumulative influence’ – a process, the speed and extent of which, is shaped by a number of other intervening variables. Indeed, the subject of political settlements represents an excellent case with respect to identifying and understanding the dynamics of research utilisation. It allows us to build on existing models and suggest useful ways forward in this important area of public policy analysis. The analysis here underscores the way in which research influence is neither clear-cut, linear or strictly a result of the innate quality or academic integrity of the body of research itself.

This article emerges from a three-year project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for International Development (DfID)[[1]](#endnote-1) and is based largely on a series of interviews with policy-makers and researchers conducted in London, Kabul, Kathmandu and Freetown as well as survey data. This has been supplemented by in-depth and comprehensive qualitative documentary analysis of all relevant publicly available UK policy papers, briefing papers, speeches and other country-level programme documents. These were identified and filtered through a systematic selection process and subject to both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. It is also important to note that we restrict our analysis to consideration of influence in policy and do not go on to consider the actual impact of policy in terms of developmental outcomes: such analysis requires demanding methodologies beyond the scope or ambition of this study and charting cause and effect in relation to complex social dynamics is extremely problematic in itself, let alone simultaneously accurately accounting for the role of research in such processes.

The focus in this article is mainly on academic, scholarly work but we also consider the role of more short-term, directly commissioned pieces of research within the wider process (such as evaluations, assessments, and forms of Political Economy Analysis), especially insofar as in their design and conceptualisation they incorporate understandings of the importance of settlements and power dynamics. The specific body of research considered was built around a core of DfID-funded studies identified and mapped primarily by utilising the UK government’s ‘R4D’ website. However, the analysis is situated in wider international perspective, and recognises the research on political settlements and wider statebuilding processes that is not funded by DfID. Indeed, the strongly internationalised nature of the networks working on statebuilding issues means this is the only realistic way the topic can be examined. DfID-commissioned researchers cannot claim a monopoly on the research in this area thus consideration of studies that fall outside this category are incorporated into the analysis.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a general introduction to the concept of the political settlement; the second outlines existing frameworks for understanding research utilisation; the third and fourth sections consider the way in which the dynamics of research uptake have played out with respect to the subject of political settlements: the third section considers the various shaping factors that determine the possible trajectories of cumulative influence; and in the fourth section the cumulative influence framework is outlined in detail.

**The Concept of the Political Settlement**

The concept of the political settlement is notoriously vague and inchoate, and has been defined in a number of ways. This makes tracking its influence on policy all the more problematic. Nevertheless, greater analytical clarity has emerged over the last decade, largely thanks to the profusion of research on the subject. This section will briefly introduce some of the main issues, themes and debates associated with the topic.

With its origins in long-standing scholarly traditions and academic spheres of political inquiry, the nature and evolution of ‘political settlements’ is increasingly viewed as a key underlying determinant of contemporary patterns of state fragility and resilience. This is at least a perspective emphasised within a certain community of academics and researchers within the political science and international development field. However, as a distinct approach, PSR is by no means dominant or monopolistic in terms of scholarly adherents (as the importance of institutionalist work would suggest), and for the purposes of this study it is important to note that much of the work emanates from a relatively small number of institutions and individuals, many with quite close connections to government. Indeed, as will be detailed later, much of the research on political settlements emerged out of DfID-funded research centres and has been promoted by research institutes such as the Overseas Development Institute, which maintains close links with DfID. In fact, the relative silence amongst other political scientists on this subject – or at least those explicitly adopting the terminology of ‘political settlements’ – is striking, and somewhat surprising given the prominence it has attained in policy. There is, for instance, little discussion of political settlements in the United States, at least in terms directly commensurate with the research outputs assessed as part of this study.

This raises the possibility that policy-makers are not only inclined to prioritise research that they have funded but that there may be some element of ‘pressure’ – even if only implicit – upon researchers working in supported institutions to produce work which aligns with broad the policy direction or vision. This is not to impugn the academic integrity of the relevant academics or to cast empirical doubt on the validity of their findings, but rather to note the sometimes subtle influences that might work to promote certain research agendas while restricting other possible avenues of study.

An approach informed by an appreciation of political settlements suggests that development outcomes, patterns of resource mobilisation and institutional change are best explained by understanding the underlying political constellations and their chief attributes (DiJohn and Putzel, 2009, 6). This, however, does not mean that institutions no longer matter, but rather that the specific form of institutions and proposed reforms need to be consonant with or adequately reflect underlying balances of power. Put differently, simply transferring Weberian institutions to fragile, developing country contexts is unlikely to be successful where this will undermine or threaten the prevailing political settlement and distribution of rents (Khan, 2010).

Political settlements have been variously defined. According to DfID, they can be understood as: ‘the forging of a common understanding, usually among elites, that their interests or beliefs are served by a particular way of organising political power’ (Whaites, 2008). Putzel and Di John add that this must be accompanied by an understanding of the extent to which settlements are the ‘*bargaining* outcomes among *contending elites*’ (DiJohn and Putzel, 2009, 4). Khan sees reciprocal interaction between settlements and institutions as key, defining them as a ‘combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability’ (Khan, 2010, 4). Political settlements are understood as being central to statebuilding ‘as they determine the relationships between different organised groups within society and how power is distributed and controlled’ (Zaum, 2013, 21).

These often unarticulated, negotiated agreements usually extend beyond elites to bind together state and society, provide legitimacy for rulers and can prevent violent conflict from occurring. Furthermore, recent research emphasises that the *inclusiveness* of the political settlement – the extent to which key elites and social constituencies are adequately incorporated into prevailing political dispensations – affects the potential for political stability (see: Hesselbein, Galooba-Mutebi and Putzel, 2006, 17; and DiJohn and Putzel, 2009, 15). Scholars stress that although political settlements may adopt ‘modern’ state structures and be underpinned by a formal constitution, in practice, power relations behind the settlement may differ greatly. While it is possible to distinguish between different forms of settlement according to certain defining attributes, Khan argues that the first important distinction is between political settlements in developing countries and those pertaining to capitalist, developed countries. The former, he explains, face crucially different determinants due to the pervasive sway of informal institutions based on patron-client organisations (Khan, 2010, 5).

It is important to be aware that the concept and underlying assumptions behind much of the political settlements research is far from uniformly accepted. Indeed, the very concept has been subject to sustained and systematic critique from scholars working in competing traditions. Indeed, one of the most prominent academics in this field – Professor Mick Moore from the Institute of Development Studies at Brighton –wrote a blog piece criticising the blind adoption of the term ‘political settlement’ by donors despite the acute lack of definitional clarity as to what it actually denotes (Moore, 2013). While such debates are beyond the scope of this paper, an interesting questions remains why it is that PSR emerged as policy-dominant while other research agendas either fell out of favour or struggled to achieve much notable influence within policy circles – the subsequent analysis seeks to account for such developments.

Donors typically work on political settlements through programmes aimed at shaping formal power-sharing mechanisms, coalition building, mediation and facilitation to peace processes; providing support to elections or political parties through technical support, parliamentary strengthening, or constitution-building processes; and addressing the exclusionary elements of a settlement (DfID, 2010, 42). However, this remains an emerging area of operations for donor organisations and thus determining exactly what external actors can do in relation to political settlements remains somewhat unclear. The political sensitivity surrounding such interventions further complicates the issue where accusations of excessive meddling and social engineering abound (Jones, 2013, 88).

On the one hand, external actors are significantly constrained in their ability to effectively shape political settlements to favour poverty alleviation outcomes. On the other hand, the often substantial resources and influence donors possess make them important actors significantly shaping political outcomes. Jones summarises this by noting that external statebuilding interventions can become ‘one party to such conflict, perhaps powerfully determining political and economic opportunities available to social forces, but never being able to fully tame the struggles to shape the emerging state apparatuses’ (Jones, 2013, 86). Similarly, DfID recognises that supporting the emergence of an inclusive political settlement can be extremely difficult and that ‘all donor actions have political ramifications’ (DfID, 2010, 26 and 38).

**Existing Models of Research Utilisation**

There is an extensive literature on research utilisation in policy. Important utilisation issues have been explored since at least the late 1970s, building on the longer established literature on policy processes. Three broad approaches to research utilisation focus on: forms of utilisation, stages in the uptake process, and determinants of achieving influence and uptake. In this section, we briefly outline the prominent aspects of each perspective. We draw attention to the strengths of each but also indicate how, independently, they present only partial accounts of the factors pertaining to utilisation. Our model of cumulative influence builds on all these approaches but seeks to provide a more comprehensive perspective. Indeed, the cumulative influence model should not be viewed as a substitute for existing models but one that draws upon their combined insights and should be understood in conjunction with them.

*Forms of influence*

Most existing understandings concentrate on different forms of utilisation. Although the precise categorisation varies, the literature is fairly consistent in identifying a number of prominent theories of utilisation. Elements of each model may be operating simultaneously and in relation to specific aspects of policy formulation. First presented by Weiss in 1979, the models are intended to capture certain aspects of reality and clarify dominant structures of causation (Weiss, 1979).

A knowledge-driven model assumes a linear sequence of stages whereby research generates knowledge which subsequently drives its use in policy (Rothschild, 1978). The associated problem-solving or policy-driven model is based on the assumption that ‘research provides empirical evidence and conclusions that help to solve a policy problem’ (Weiss, 1979, 427). The main difference being that the process ‘begins with the identification of a problem by a customer who requests the researcher to identify and assess alternative solutions’ (Hanney, Gonzalez-Block and Buxton, 2003, 8). The interactive model abandons this linear interpretation and understands it as a set of interactions.

The political model pertains when policymakers have a predetermined position over a policy issue for reasons of interest, ideology or power. In this case, it is unlikely that policymakers will be open to new evidence, yet they can still use research findings as ‘ammunition in an adversarial system of policy making’ (Hanney et al, 2003, 8). Policymakers therefore refer to supportive conclusions in a partisan way. A closely related ‘tactical’ model refers to policymakers invoking research ‘irrespective of its conclusions’, to delay decisions on pressing issues or deflect responsibility for unpopular policy outcomes (Weiss, 1979, 429).

Finally, the ‘enlightenment’ or ‘percolation’ model argues that the gradual ‘sedimentation’ of insights, theories, concepts and perspectives generated by research eventually permeates the policymaking process (Janowitz, 1972, 105-35). This model does not assume a direct link between research and policymakers, nor that findings will be compatible with values and goals of decision-makers. In the long-term, however, these findings can overturn values and patterns of thought and redefine the policy agenda.

The cumulative influence framework, outlined below, should be conceived as embracing all such forms of influence, which are apparent and can operate simultaneously to varying extents in different contexts and in relation to different specific subjects. In effect, cumulative influence can result from either direct and indirect forms of influence or, most likely, a complex combination of both. In many ways, cumulative influence is strongly tied to the knowledge-driven model but the way in which the accumulation of knowledge spurs change in a gradual, diffuse and indirect manner also has much in common with the enlightenment model.

*Process-based models*

A second approach to understanding research utilisation seeks to clarify the various stages in the research-to-use process. Most existing models are ideal-types that outline the essence of the relationships rather than their messy and imperfect reality (Coleman, 1991, 422). This reflects the difficulty of developing generalisations where ‘the method and degree of “knowledge utilisation” is shaped by a host of factors that are peculiar to leadership styles, institutional architecture … or policy domain.’ Perhaps the most well-known is that of the Payback Model developed by Hanney et al. A modified version is presented below.

**(Figure 1 here)**

The Payback model in effect presents an idealised stage-by-stage cyclical process which follows the utilisation process from initial identification of need and commissioning through to uptake into primary and secondary policy. It captures the way influence can be achieved during the research process and how outcomes from both research and policy application generate demand for further research as gaps in knowledge are identified. The model does not explain *why* influence or uptake occurs but rather how, ideally, the process operates. Nor does it seek to capture the many variables impacting upon the process, although the model is useful in identifying where such intervening variables might be apparent. While the process is clearly one that unfolds over time, the model does not adequately convey how accumulation of knowledge over time is a crucial variable promoting uptake.

*Determinants of utilisation*

At the forefront of efforts to understand the determinants of influence has been the Overseas Development Institute’s Research and Policy in Development program or ‘RAPID’. While most active during the first half of the 2000s, it continues to produce additional, more targeted, analysis. RAPID’s major objective was to clarify the role of knowledge on policy and practice and the skills and capacities needed for researchers and organisations to effectively translate knowledge into action.[[2]](#endnote-2) Many subsequent studies explicitly borrow from the RAPID framework: it has become an extremely influential and important model and replicated extensively (Pellini and Serrat, 2010).

The RAPID framework is essentially an idealised explanatory model comprised of four clusters of factors impacting research uptake: external influences; political context; links between policy-makers and other stakeholders; and evidence. In summarising the framework, Court and Maxwell state that, ‘successful evidence-based policy making occurs when the external environment is right, evidence is credible and well-communicated, the political context is such that policymakers are responsive to new research findings, and the links are well made between researchers and policy makers’ (Court and Maxwell, 2006, 714-15). Our research broadly confirms many of the RAPID project’s findings. However, we conceptualise the types of general factors identified by RAPID in a slightly different light, as shaping influences on the general process of cumulative influence.

The existing understandings, frameworks and models fail to adequately capture the crucial play of time and the accumulation of research on a particular subject. Our cumulative influence framework is not focused on the discrete stages in the research to policy process but rather on the overall relationship between the emergence and growth of a significant body of research and its simultaneous uptake in policy: a process which will throughout be shaped by a variety of other factors pertaining to the various dimensions of research influence.

**Shaping Factors**

Our cumulative influence framework has to be understood in conjunction with an understanding of the factors which serve to either drive or restrain research uptake, and which will determine the resulting extent to which cumulative influence is actually achieved, how rapidly, and if at all. These factors correspond closely to the determinants identified by RAPID but we argue that rather than being understood independently they must be understood in conjunction with the notion of cumulative influence, serving to either drive and restrain that process. In outlining the various shaping factors pertaining to cumulative influence, the RAPID framework has been adapted to the specific context of statebuilding policy in fragile states. Based on our research, the following table outlines the various dimensions and issues that we consider as especially important determinants of uptake:

**(Table 1 here)**

In relation to each of the four dimensions outlined below we first discuss them in general terms as well as illustrating their manifestation in relation to political settlements research.

*Structural dimension*

First, certain structural factors pertaining to statebuilding research use in fragile states can have a strong underlying impact on research uptake. The specific country context and levels of fragility, institutional dynamics and the relative politicisation of issues surrounding statebuilding all exert a powerful underlying influence on the dynamics of research use**.** The often fast-paced, difficult and dangerous environment in which research and policy operates, ingrained institutional approaches to statebuilding interventions and political imperatives generally serve to restrain research use, yet occasionally political factors spur officials to retrospectively generate an evidence-base for an agenda driven largely by political motives or ideologically-based convictions.

Specifically in relation to political settlements, a key structural factor impeding research use has been the strong influence of existing ideological approaches to governance reform. Indeed, the insights derived from the political settlements literature is widely seen as moving development discourse beyond a limited focus on institutional design which informed the ‘good governance’ agenda of the 2000s. The associated ‘liberal peace’ agenda sought solutions to fragility through marketization and democratization based on the Western model. This was compounded by institutional factors which favoured technical approaches to governance reform, while approaches which required an intimate understanding of politics were resisted within British policymaking circles and DfID especially has traditionally been wary of getting its hands dirty in political work. Indeed, this is still apparent despite the dominant consensus, reflected in policy, that politics matters.

*Policy dimension*

The second dimension pertains to the various aspects of policymaking incorporating organisational issues, staffing, decision-making processes, incentive structures, approaches to risk and subjective factors associated with individual staff members. All these areas can constitute strong forces either constraining or enabling research uptake; so, within DfID generally, while massive investments in research funding, the roll-out of innovative research strategies and development of central research repositories have greatly enhanced research influence and uptake, this has been partly offset by weaknesses in institutional memory, knowledge management and record keeping, especially at country level.[[3]](#endnote-3) Organisational factors such as the Business Case process, which requires staff to establish the evidence base for interventions, is nevertheless offset by restraining factors such as inhibitive approaches to risk and the time pressures faced by over-burdened country staff. Most advisors possess research backgrounds or actively seek out research on their own initiative driven by an interest in the subject, however some are more operational in approach and preferring technical fixes thus limiting their engagement with research.

Political settlements research has benefitted from large investments from central research budgets, primarily through large research Centres such as the Crisis States Research Centre at LSE. Also, the manner in which high-level policy papers greatly shape the substance and form of policy and programming at country level has, at least rhetorically, promoted engagement by field office staff. Nevertheless, uptake has equally suffered from deficiencies in the policy domain noted above. For instance, inadequate country-level staffing has left key advisers with insufficient time to fully engage with the latest research.[[4]](#endnote-4)

*Research dimension*

Third, the potential influence of research can be greatly affected by its own particular attributes – its quality, focus, relevance, presentation and so forth – and its dissemination and communication. Contradictions or a lack of consensus in the research may impede uptake insofar as it causes officials to doubt the validity of findings. These are points well-established in the wider utilisation literature. Our investigations confirmed their general importance for political settlements research, but in fragile contexts there is an added premium on ensuring research is usable, accessible and relevant given the often-heightened pressures upon country staff. Part of this challenge rests with the various intermediary roles and services, but researchers can only help themselves by paying close attention to the style, presentation and communication of their outputs. Researchers sometimes, erroneously, fear that enhancing influence necessarily entails ‘dumbing down’ their findings or sacrificing nuance and complexity. Rather, basic principles of good presentation, dissemination and communication can make the difference between an output being ignored or used.

The research dimension has generally constituted a driving force in terms of overall uptake, with an increasing body of high quality, relevant and accessible research on political settlements. Moreover, there is a high level of consensus with respect to the central arguments, dynamics and issues at stake, notwithstanding ongoing lively debate over precise definitions and questions of emphasis. Many academics have presented their work directly to policymakers at internal seminars, conferences or annual retreats. Policy think tanks and research institutions have been particularly proactive in presenting and repackaging complex ideas into forms that are accessible and useful to officials. Nevertheless, restraining factors persist with some academic outputs remaining poorly presented, scattered with basic grammatical errors and typos (especially working papers) and written in dense and convoluted prose. Also, some outputs focus on geographical regions or issues that are not especially relevant to concerns of British policymakers, thus limiting their potential impact.[[5]](#endnote-5)

*Translation dimension*

The fourth and final area of shaping factors is what we term ‘translation’. The literature on research utilisation has increasingly drawn attention to enhancing the linkages between research and policy in fostering the enhanced uptake of findings. Translation here essentially refers to the issue of boiling down, synthesizing, condensing and conveying often complex research into practically relevant and operationally useful findings, recommendations or conclusions as well as encapsulating the various roles and processes that help achieve such an objective. Intermediaries inside and outside of government are increasingly utilised to bridge the academic-policy divide. Formal and informal networks comprising informed policymakers and researchers can encourage dialogue and facilitate knowledge exchange processes. Enhancing understanding between the supposed ‘two communities’ of research and policy is another important factor.

In relation to translation issues, we can observe the overwhelmingly positive role that various forms of intermediaries, brokers and policy entrepreneurs have played in making sense of scholarly research on political settlements and ensuring it finds its way to relevant policymakers. For instance, DfID’s own Evidence Broker, Will Evans, wrote an important paper establishing the evidence base behind DfID’s policy on political settlements (Evans, 2013). A GSDRC paper by Putzel and DiJohn was widely read by officials. The movement of researchers into policy positions and opportunities afforded officials to conduct research, when utilised, have done much to promote uptake.

Nevertheless, there remain serious impediments to interchange between the research and policy worlds, and such initiatives remain enormously under-utilised within the British government despite tentative steps in the right direction. Similarly, deficiencies persist with respect to the relevance of centrally-based knowledge brokers to the day-to-day work of country offices – while they have performed important roles in refining high-level policy positions, they have been under-utilised at country level. Field-based officials tend to rely on studies dealing specifically with the dynamics of the political settlement in the country concerned.[[6]](#endnote-6)

So, the various factors outlined above serve to shape, over time, the possible trajectories of cumulative influence that will be achieved, in effect determining if, when, how and to what extent research findings penetrate and ultimately influence policy. Yet, these factors should be considered as serving a facilitatory role; they are necessary but not sufficient. Ultimately, the overriding factor is the gradual accumulation of a strong, convincing and empirically-based body of research and evidence. It is this process that we outline below.

**Cumulative Influence**

In the analysis presented below we describe the concept of cumulative influence – the process whereby, as the body of research and evidence on a particular subject coalesces, strengthens and grows, the increased influence of research is likely to follow suit (although often with a substantial time-lag and in an iterative, non-linear fashion) as manifested in its ultimate uptake in policy. Essentially, the cumulative influence process assumes that the magnitude and strength of the body of research on a certain subject is a major variable determining research influence and uptake (mindful of the important role of key shaping factors).

With respect to political settlements we witnessed a clearly positive trajectory of cumulative influence and uptake. However, we will draw attention to possible negative trajectories that the process might take and various barriers to influence that might be present at any stage. There is no certainty that a positive cumulative process will occur in relation to any particular area of research, even if the body of research is large and convincing – the relationship is not deterministic, but more probabilistic in nature. Serious countervailing factors in some or all of the identified shaping factors will need to be exerting a considerable negative effect for officials to avoid recognising, engaging with and ultimately adopting research findings in policy where a significant and convincing body of evidence exists.

This section is divided into four idealised phases and their respective prominent characteristics. The following narrative seeks to describe the cumulative influence model presented in the diagram below (Fig. 2). Again, it is important to note that no diagrammatical representation of the process can accurately capture what is in fact an extremely amorphous, complex and non-linear phenomenon. Nevertheless, it represents a first step in envisioning its broad outlines and prominent characteristics. The table conveys the broad outlines of the process, although it is a stylistic, illustrative guide, rather than a precise representation. Indeed, capturing such amorphous and intangible phenomena would be more or less impossible given the perils of quantification and attribution in research utilisation.

**(Figure 2 here)**

**Phase 1: Emergence**

In the early stages of the process, we see the first pieces of research on a subject emerge. This research generally builds on earlier studies or concepts in the existing stock of knowledge. Key terms and ideas may be only loosely defined and the content may be purely conceptual, speculative, exploratory or hypothetical at this stage rather than being based on concrete empirical data. This early research may well be produced by government-funded centres but this will likely be complemented by work done elsewhere. In other situations, the body of research may emerge in a more independent manner and only later be supported explicitly and with government resources. So, the nascent body of research and evidence begins to build, research questions are posed and tentative explanations, often largely based on secondary literature, provided. Most outputs tend to be academic, published in scholarly journals or university working papers. At this stage, it is unlikely that there is much resonance of research within policy circles, especially where findings might challenge dominant approaches. It is perfectly possible that research leads to dead ends or fails to take hold within academic circles, funding dries up and academics move on to different questions.

*Political settlements*

Although recent research on political settlements is sometimes regarded as wholly novel, that is perhaps more due to its recent emergence in the policy arena and the designation of the relevant processes, dynamics and relationships specifically as ‘political settlements’ – a new concept to describe behaviour that has long been the subject of political philosophers. In fact the concept emerges from a literature going back many years, even centuries, if the works of thinkers such as Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Karl Marx are understood as addressing related concerns (DiJohn and Putzel, 2009, 14). The concept is also closely associated with elements of the work of historical sociologists such as Antonio Gramsci on state theory and ‘the compromises struck between social forces’ (Jones, 2013, 71). As Jones explains, this approach draws attention to the idea that creating ‘stable state institutions depends less on institutional design than on forging a durable settlement among dominant socio-political coalitions’ (Jones, 2013, 71).

In the twentieth century, a number of scholars, such as Dahlman, worked on related issues although their work was not explicitly concerned with the importance of settlements to the challenges posed by weak or conflict-affected states. Contemporary scholars working on political settlements draw upon these intellectual foundations. However, as Putzel and Di John explain, ‘while historical political economists are applying the concept within a long tradition of studying power relations, the concept does not have a specific pedigree in political theory or political science, though it has been deployed by liberal political theorists’ (DiJohn and Putzel, 2009, 6).

In the 1990s, a handful of studies appeared which touched on issues that would later be more explicitly incorporated in political settlements research. Overall, this formative body of research did not influence policy, despite the fact that DfID’s 1997 White Paper discussed in a general fashion the importance of tackling the exclusion of marginalised groups, promoting social cohesion, and helping to solve political problems before they create conflict (DfID, 1997, 69-70). Rather, the priorities described are common features of the more general conflict resolution literature. DfID’s work on weak states, conflict and instability around the turn of the millennium was principally informed by the ‘good governance’ agenda and the understandings derived from New Institutional Economics, and which were then favoured in the World Bank.

This is also reflected in DfID’s 2000 White Paper, which emphasised the importance of helping countries build effective, accountable and responsive government systems and efficient markets based on the security, rule of law and protection of property rights. The Paper notes the importance of ‘making political institutions work for poor people’ and ‘promoting effective and inclusive systems of government’. It goes on to state that countries will be ‘less vulnerable to conflict where economic and political systems are more inclusive’ (DfID, 2000, 23-30). Inclusion here, however, is meant in terms of participation of poor people in political and economic processes and not as elite inclusion in political settlements.

DfID’s Target Strategy paper on governance was also very much within this mold (DfID, 2001). The assumption held that if appropriate institutions – namely democracy and free markets – could be installed in weak states, improved governance and pro-poor development would follow. There is no explicit mention of political settlements, elite bargains or related terminology, either directly or tangentially. It is clear that the concept has not yet entered the policy discourse, which up to that stage remained restricted to a broad good governance agenda. This recognized the importance of politics, but only in the limited sense of the behaviour of political actors and the effects of specific policy regimes and institutional design..

**Phase 2: Tentative engagement**

Assuming the early research foundation provokes interest in academic circles and spurs further studies, after some time the emergent body of research is supplemented by findings from new research, key issues are clarified and researchers begin to explore specific issues in greater detail. A number of empirically informed case studies might confirm initial hypotheses, suggest different areas to focus on or raise new subordinate issues and questions. Overall, the research agenda gathers momentum. As research strength and credibility builds, the issue begins to spread within associated research networks and may be picked up and utilised by other research organisations, such as think tanks and policy research organisations. Such organisations may begin to draw on the research in their own outputs, some of which may be directly commissioned by government.

Thus, at this stage we can expect the issue to start seeping into policy circles and the attention of certain officials, whether directly or indirectly through more general discussion within the organisation. We should also not discount the potential movement of researchers into government positions who bring with them their expertise on certain issues. Yet, given the still somewhat limited nature of the body of research, the issue may fail to feature significantly within the policy environment. Potential ‘policy windows’ might be missed because the central findings do not appear convincing enough at this stage or the research is not being read for any number of reasons, be it the complex and inaccessible nature of the literature or the absence of officials with the time, capacity or inclination to engage with the research.

*Political settlements*

Building on the tentative and limited earlier foundations, scattered pieces emerged in the early 2000s which, often presented within wider arguments, considered the concept of political settlements or at least closely related subjects. A key theme at this time was in relation to critiques of the dominant ‘liberal peace’ paradigm promoting post-conflict democratisation and marketization. For instance, Brett argued that ‘reform programmes cannot be treated as a technical exercise based on the implementation of imported blueprints, but a political process that demands solutions that are adapted to local conditions that take account of the demands, assets and capacities of contending parties’ (Brett, 2002). Khan was also developing his work on the closely related subject of economic rents and systems of informal neo-patrimonial governance. Despite the existence of such studies, research on settlements was still not fully formed and a persuasive central narrative had yet to emerge which could compete with the dominant good governance discourse. Nevertheless, early explorations would serve as the basis for further research that would emerge in subsequent years.

Despite the emergent research agenda, an institutionalist approach was still at the heart of DfID’s 2006 development White Paper. It describes good governance being primarily about capability, accountability and responsiveness: put another way, the state must be able to get things done, public institutions should respond to citizens’ needs, and public officials can be held to account for their actions or decisions (DfID, 2006, 20). The centrality of politics is recognised: ‘This is about politics. Politics determines how resources are used and policies are made. And politics determines who benefits, In short, good governance is about good politics’ (DfID, 2006, 23). But, again, here politics is understood in the more immediate sense of who is in power, how the electoral system operates or what policies are in place. This understanding arguably represented a transitional phase away from a limited technocratic approach and it certainly drew off important research which stressed the politics of development, such as that by Adrian Leftwich who was working closely with DfID at that time (Leftwich, 2000). Indeed, the adoption of the Drivers of Change analytical methodology in the early 2000s – which Leftwich played a key role in developing – suggested a heightened awareness of the importance of understanding political dynamics (Leftwich, 2007). Nevertheless, even if closely related, this is not strictly coterminous with the political settlements literature.

**Phase 3: Translation and uptake**

Eventually, again assuming a positive trajectory overall, in this third phase a powerful consensus and robust body of research and evidence is achieved based on numerous studies and supported by empirical findings. An important role is played by intermediary actors who attempt to make sense of the now quite substantial existing literature. Research translation might be undertaken by think tanks or dedicated knowledge brokers and policy research services such as GSDRC. Research syntheses may also be produced by academic centres themselves to summarise findings in a format accessible to policymakers. If a particular piece of research happens to have been read by senior Ministers or civil servants they may be circulated as ‘recommended reading’ thus improving the chance they will be read.

As the weight and persuasiveness of the issue is now considerable, so called ‘policy entrepreneurs’ or well-placed policymakers may engage with the research and those who produced it, such as prominent academics. Such people may seek to get the issue firmly onto the policy agenda through a process of internal advocacy. Key to this will be socialising the issue within governmental policy networks, organising debates and seminars, and inviting relevant researchers to symposia. The issue then reaches a wider audience and may become the subject of debate within formal and informal networks of relevant officials. Understanding begins to develop and research demand increases. The subject may well have entered mainstream discourse, featuring in parliamentary committee reports, official speeches and media.

A key juncture might be a prominent policy window such as the writing of a white paper and this might mean that the concept is tentatively adopted. Discrete opportunities, such as policy reviews, can be a crucial period in which policymakers take stock of existing evidence, engage closely with experts and generate intensive debate. Academic experts seconded into government positions liaise closely with officials and assist them in refining understandings. This increased engagement in policy circles may spur officials to seek further information and research leading to the commissioning of new studies or research summaries, evaluations of existing work or discussions with international partners. Interaction with relevant researchers likely becomes deeper and more reciprocal and interactive. Researchers may be invited to give talks, brief officials, comment on policy drafts or serve on expert panels. The issue may enter into policy at this stage, but it will likely be accepted in a somewhat marginal fashion and detail might not have been worked through or precise operational implications formulated.

*Political settlements*

From around 2005/2006 more studies began to explore political settlements in greater depth, building on the limited foundations. The second phase of the Crisis States research programme – funded by DfID – placed the issue at the heart of its research agenda (Putzel, 2006). Working papers by academics such as Brett and Hesselbein developed a more sophisticated conception of the central issues at stake (Brett, 2006; Hesselbein, 2011). Also around this time, North et al were developing their concept of Limited Access Orders which had important implications in understanding elite behaviour and represented a move away from the earlier narrower institutional focus.. Other academics were increasingly exploring the issue from various perspectives. Khan’s 2005 review of DfID’s Governance Target Strategy Paper was informed by insights which would come to be more explicitly connected to the political settlements approach. He noted how the narrow institutional reform programme favoured by DfID would often be difficult to implement because it is ‘likely to involve political conflicts and face opposition from vested interests’ and that the ‘real area of reform may be in the reorganisation of factional politics so that a stable dominant faction can emerge and carry out transformative interventions’ (Khan, 2005, 7 and 24).

By the mid-2000s, there were signs that this evolving research frontier was beginning to make inroads into the policy world. For instance, DfID’s 2007 *Governance, Development and Democratic Politics* paper noted how institutional change ‘requires changing the way power is held and used through politics. Politics determines how a society makes choices about the way in which people live together.’ Although this is evidence of a more mature understanding of politics than earlier papers, it was still not consistent with the deeper message of the settlements literature and there was no direct evidence of reference to the literature or discussion of key concepts such as elites bargains or balances of power (DfID, 2007).

However, only after around 2007 did political settlements research begin to seriously gather momentum, and as this occurred policymakers began to more seriously consider the implications of emergent findings – building on the foundations laid in its recognition of the importance of politics to development – and this culminated in the subject’s prominent inclusion in policy by 2010. By this time, the literature was more developed and key issues were supported through in-depth case study analysis. Importantly, in promoting policy uptake, the Overseas Development Institute produced a paper on statebuilding in 2007 summarising emerging findings and placed political settlements at the centre of its analysis (Fritz and Menocal, 2007). Given that the paper was directly commissioned by DfID, it was influential and widely read across its departments: interviewees involved in developing statebuilding policies attest to its importance.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Studies such as these would form an important backdrop to the research process carried out by Alan Whaites from the Governance and Social Development Group at DfID and which resulted in the hugely influential *States in Development* Discussion Paper of 2007. The paper drew on the ODI paper as well as a GSDRC literature review and an OECD-DAC framing paper. Moreover, Whaites oversaw an extensive internal and external consultation process which ‘engendered a rich debate among international experts and development practitioners’ (Whaites, 2007, 3). Many experts from DfID funded centres and elsewhere were consulted, including Mick Moore, Sue Unsworth, Adrian Leftwich, Joel Migdal, Verena Fritz, Alina Rocha Menocal, and James Putzel.

This process was crucial and effectively represented the first time that the issue of political settlements truly entered into the policy bloodstream. As such, this case underlines the importance of policy and research interaction and dialogue in facilitating uptake. It also highlights the great benefit that can result from allowing well-placed officials time to reflect on key issues and consult with experts in wider policy networks. From the research perspective, this period represented a ‘policy window’ – a distinct period of time when DfID was seriously thinking about its statebuilding approach; recognising this, researchers were able to use the opportunity to promote their findings and feed into the policymaking process. The international nature of the consultations underpinning the *States in Development* paper and the subsequent development of the BPSS paper should also be noted – there was extensive interaction with officials from the OSCE, World Bank and UN.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Whaites’s paper kick-started a period of quite intensive policy development, culminating in the 2009 White Paper and associated BPSS paper of 2010. Many concepts explored in *States in Development* served as the basis for these subsequent papers.[[9]](#endnote-9) This process was supported by further detailed research which emerged during this period as well as useful research syntheses; for instance, the Crisis States Research Centre prepared a paper – ‘Summary of Policy Relevant Findings’ – for DfID in 2009, which fed into these policy papers (DfID, 2010, 18 note 21). The networks and consultations catalysed by Whaites were extended and continued in the process leading to the new policy. A range of leading experts were consulted and, as Will Evans concludes, the BPSS paper drew on a variety of literature but few are directly cited (Evans, 2013, 9). Ultimately this culminated in inclusive political settlements and processes becoming one of DfID’s central objectives of statebuilding in fragile states (DfID, 2010, 22).

**Phase 4: Consolidation and refinement**

Once an issue has found its way into policy, the concepts penetrate deeper into the organisation and gradually a stronger understanding of the research is attained as officials grapple with the ideas. The policy is rolled out in country offices and early experiences feed back to headquarters or inform research funding strategies, directly in the context of policy formulation consultation with country representatives or indirectly through commissioned evaluations. More discrete pieces of research conducted and commissioned at country level – such as governance assessments, drivers of change analysis and conflict assessments – which may incorporate understandings of the subject in their design may serve to add specific evidence of relevance and applicability of the issue and further familiarise officials with the ideas and concepts.

At this stage, a period of research consolidation, refinement and strengthening takes place whereby new centres with an explicit mandate to explore the issue in greater depth are funded. Specific areas requiring a stronger evidence base may be identified and more research organisations begin to work on the issue – often in effect following increased funding. Further feedback from networks of relevant specialists, experts and academics is gathered and discussed. Other international actors may engage further with the subject, often during their own periods of policy reflection and formulation (such as the World Bank’s WDR process). Ultimately, a more cooperative, interactive and reciprocal relationship between research and policy emerges around the subject, facilitated by various intermediaries and characterised by a more lively exchange of ideas within policy networks.

*Political settlements*

The latest period with respect to the subject of political settlements, taking us up to the present day, has been typified by an increasingly interactive, reciprocal and supportive relationship between government and researchers in enhancing and refining understanding. Although the concept was already central to UK statebuilding policy in fragile states, there was a feeling that key aspects of the issue were not fully understood and the empirical evidence somewhat weak.

Also, as the BPSS framework was gradually rolled out and implemented in fragile countries, it became clear that the full operational implications had not been fully worked through: country offices found it challenging to determine exactly how to work on political settlements.[[10]](#endnote-10) Indeed, the adoption of the policy in-country has been somewhat tentative and uncertain. There was little evidence of country-level policy engaging directly with the more theoretical literature.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, through the broader influence of higher policy papers we do see the filtering down of an awareness of political settlements and evidence in country operational plans. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan, where it would seem engagement with this literature would be crucial, there was little engagement with the general or theoretical literature outlined above: research utilised in approaching the idea of a political settlement incorporating the Taliban has been locally-focussed and context specific.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Moving beyond the BPSS paper, this process of refinement has been manifested in DfID’s support for new phases of Research Programme Consortia. For instance, the DfID funded centre at the University of Manchester – Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID), builds on earlier DfID-funded research and seeks to understand how settlements enable different forms of public action in particular contexts and considers what international agencies can do to strengthen or avoid undermining effective and legitimate settlements. Also, the Center for International Cooperation (CIC) in New York was commissioned by DfID to explore the concept further in the Pathways out of Fragility project led by Bruce Jones who had earlier been involved in the consultations surrounding the writing of BPSS (Jones, Elgin-Cossart and Esberg, 2012).

Academics have similarly sought to further strengthen and refine understandings. For instance, Hesselbein has explored in greater detail the relationship between patterns of resource mobilisation and elite bargains (Hesselbein, 2011, 22-23). Antonio Giustozzi has extended the analysis to explore the relationship between elite bargains and the state’s monopoly on violence, explaining how military effectiveness can suffer as a result of elite bargains (Giustozzi, 2011, 23-25). Furthermore, there is growing evidence of the concept of political settlements seeping into mainstream discourse on fragile states. Popular books, such as *Why Nations Fail* by Acemoglu and Robinson, engage with some of the issues raised in the literature if not always explicitly (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013). Other texts on fragile states and statebuilding frequently engage with issues surrounding settlements and elite bargains (see: Sisk, 2013; Brock, Holm and Stohl, 2011; Chandler and Sisk (Eds.), 2013; Egnell and Halden, 2013; and Kaplan, 2008). Some critics remained, but these were by now marginal.

By this time, and very much taking the lead from DfID, other government departments had signed up to the importance of working on political settlements. For instance, the MoD’s doctrine paper on *Security and Stabilisation* draws off Whaites’s paper in emphasising the importance of political settlements to stabilising fragile states (MoD, 2009, 7 and 27). The doctrine also essentially follows the new integrated approach which was then in development. Evidence of the extent to which the issue has percolated into official discourse is also apparent in parliamentary select committee findings. In its 2012 report on *Working Effectively in Conflict Affected States* the International Development Committee notes that using ‘leverage to bring about those more inclusive political settlements is something that the UK is … beginning to think about doing and could do more of.’ (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2012, Ev 4-5, 49-51, and 93).

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So, we have seen how it took the gradual consolidation of research on political settlements to occur before policymakers began to seriously consider the issue. Once a critical mass of research was available policymakers began to pay more attention, and we can observe a tentative engagement with the issue and consideration of what research findings might entail from an operational perspective. In practical terms, this manifested itself in greater dialogue and engagement with researchers. By around 2007 and 2008 there existed a fairly robust body of research suggesting a powerful consensus among experts – at least those working within a number of influential universities and research centres in the UK. The central messages were iteratively communicated to policymakers which ultimately gained purchase amongst a number of key advisers or ‘policy entrepreneurs’ in government, before being socialised more widely among officials and ultimately adopted by senior management as a central plank of UK policy.

However, it is important to keep in mind that much of the research on political settlements emerged out of institutions explicitly funded by DfID. It is likely that the fact of existing relationships formed during their establishment meant that these networks were already quite strong and thus greatly facilitated these early interactions. As such, the emergence of a significant body of research on the subject was probably necessary but not entirely sufficient in moving influence beyond this phase. It would be going too far to suggest that DfID leaned on researchers to produce findings which supported an agenda they wished to pursue. Nevertheless, the inevitable ‘filtering’ that takes place through bidding processes and the fact that successful centres would be somewhat dependent on producing ‘policy relevant’ research for continued funding, suggests there may have been an underlying dynamic which tended to favour certain research output – sympathetic to emerging policy agendas – over others. However, such conclusions can only be inferred and are difficult to confirm and evidence definitively.

Regardless of the precise origins of the interaction between researchers and policymakers, there was subsequently an increased demand for directly commissioned studies that translated the main themes into operationally relevant findings and recommendations. We then witness much greater dialogue on the issue as manifested in the extensive and international consultations around the BPSS paper. The issue gained traction in other departments, and in a relatively short space of time came to underpin cross-government approaches to statebuilding in fragile states. Subsequently, focus shifted to exploring the issue in greater depth, supported by funding for new research projects. There has also been an emphasis on working through the operational implications for DfID’s engagement in fragile states as experiences of engaging with political settlements in the field began to filter back through evaluation and lesson learning processes.

Political settlements research outputs have achieved diverse forms of influence, essentially capturing the full range of types of influence described in the theoretical literature. At one end of the spectrum, we encountered numerous instances of the direct, instrumental utilisation of research findings in policy or programming. This was mainly the case with commissioned studies in the field for a specific purpose, such as political economy analyses. There was only marginal evidence of academic research being used in such a manner, and mainly because it is generally not in a form to easily digest and apply in operational settings. Rather, the influence of such research occurred at the other end of the spectrum whereby findings seep into policy discourse through a process of osmosis and ‘selective absorption’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

However, whether influence was direct or indirect, this is not necessarily an accurate measure of its ultimate *significance*. Rather, our findings suggest that over time academic research has had a more significant influence in shaping and framing broad statebuilding policy approaches, and largely through more indirect forms of conceptual ‘enlightenment’ rather than the direct and instrumental application of their main findings. Conversely, research outputs such as short-term analyses or assessments do not appear to have been of great significance beyond their immediate context, despite being occasionally referred to as illustrative cases in high-level policy papers.

In broad terms, we can conclude that political settlements research had, by at least 2010, achieved significant influence on British policy, evidenced by the unambiguous commitments of the UK government – in particular DfID – to the issue, especially in fragile states. The influence achieved was by no means straightforward or direct but rather accrued as the cumulative weight, persuasiveness and credibility of research on the issue increased.

That this issue should emerge as a central element of UK policy on statebuilding was by no means preordained or inevitable. A number of barriers stood in the way of its uptake, not least the powerful ideological preference among officials for the good governance approach to formal institutionalisation based on Western models of the state, democratisation and market-led economic reform. There was an associated tendency to seek technocratic short-cuts to generating positive development outcomes and progressive reform in fragile states while avoiding what was seen as the messy business of political work in such countries.

However, a number of key factors help to explain how the emerging research on political settlements began to influence policy. Many such factors appear, retrospectively, to be as much the result of chance moments and contingency. Yet, equally, proactive researchers and policymakers took advantage of critical junctures and opportunities to push the debate forward. Of crucial importance, was the opportunity Alan Whaites was afforded to conduct the review process on DfID’s approach to statebuilding. This process was assisted by publication of research summaries and synthesis pieces which condensed existing research into an understandable, clear and accessible form.

The influence of political settlements research at country level has been somewhat less apparent, and despite the *Building Peaceful States and Societies* paper being rolled out in fragile countries the adoption has been somewhat tentative and uncertain. There was little evidence of country level policy engaging directly with the more theoretical literature.

**Conclusion**

The speed or extent to which the process of cumulative influence takes place is determined by, amongst other things: prominent factors relating to the specific policy context; the existence or otherwise of various barriers and facilitators; and the effectiveness of available translation functions. Overall, the process can be described as iterative, incremental, non-linear and ad hoc, with alternating periods of accelerating uptake, levelling off or perhaps even decline. Debate, discussion and knowledge exchange is evident throughout but to varying degrees depending on the state of the body of research, the level of its penetration within policy circles, the weight and influence of associated policy networks, the presence of facilitating intermediaries and the proactivity and skills of researchers in effective communication and dissemination of findings.

We are not suggesting the process is problem free or inevitably positive – it is perfectly possible for the process to reverse or stall due to a wide range of factors, all discussed above. Nevertheless, where a strong, coherent and convincing body of research and evidence emerges on a certain subject, there is a likelihood that, over time, many of the positive factors and dynamics will take hold and the cumulative influence will manifest itself in the increasing engagement with and uptake of the research by policymakers.

This cumulative process is impacted on at all levels and stages by the pervasive effect of chance and contingency. Good fortune can be the difference between research being either ignored or read, understood and acted upon. This can relate to the presence of certain individuals with the appropriate background, expertise or outlook to effectively engage with and promote research within official circles, at either headquarters or country level. Whether individual policymakers engage with research can be highly dependent on unique contextual factors or the specific character of individuals, their skills and competencies. Moreover, there is arguably a limit to how far incentive structures and institutional requirements can promote research use. Indeed, attempts to over-formalise or pressure officials to use research may actually undermine the spontaneous operation of important informal networks or lead officials to adopt ‘coping mechanisms’ such as selectively seeking out research that supports predetermined agendas.

This all suggests that from the academic perspective, there is a need for researcher resolve, commitment and perseverance. While the cumulative model might suggest researchers should simply trust in the passage of time, this would be mistaken. Such influence will fail to occur if researchers do not carefully consider other factors impinging on uptake. Our model of cumulative influence should not encourage complacency on the part of researchers, content that as long as they keep producing relevant outputs, they will eventually find their way into policy. On the contrary, positive cumulative influence, while ultimately dependent on a body of consistent and convincing research, will occur when supporting factors coalesce to spur uptake of that body of research. Many of these factors are the responsibility of researchers, not least good presentation, clear writing style and proactive dissemination and communication of findings.

From the policy perspective, the cumulative influence model highlights a requirement for strategic, long-term approaches to research funding and management. Current government funding models appear well-placed to foster and enable such long-term academic commitment. There is also an important role for shorter-term studies which meet operational needs, and the hope would be that such studies are conceptually informed by the deeper, longer-term knowledge emerging from academic centres and individual scholars. Individual academic outputs may not appear to generate significant influence in policy circles, but as such studies are supplemented by further research, either by the same researchers or others, findings become part of a broader ‘critical mass’ of evidence which will in all likelihood eventually penetrate policy circles, shift thinking and catalyse policy change.

**10,863 words (all inclusive)**

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**Endnotes**

1. The overarching project is entitled ‘The Influence of DfID-Sponsored State Building-Oriented Research on British Policy in Fragile, Post-Conflict Environments’ and is jointly funded by the ESRC and DfID (grant reference: RES-167-25-0596). The Principal Investigator is Professor Sultan Barakat. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The RAPID program involved theoretical, case study and practical work to achieve these objectives and the results have been widely disseminated. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interviews, UK officials, Nepal. Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This was especially apparent in Afghanistan, where the DfID country office suffered from gaps in advisory staff. Interviews, DfID officials, Kabul, December 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This point was raised in relation to some of the Crisis States research centred upon Latin America. Interview, DfID official, March 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview, senior DfID and FCO officials, Kabul, December 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Interviews, senior DfID officials, London, March and April 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interview, senior DfID official, London, May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interview, senior DfID official, London, April 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Interviews, senior UK officials, Kabul, December 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Interviews, DfID officials, Nepal, Sierra Leone and Kabul, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interview, FCO official, Kabul December 2012 and FCO official, London, March 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Interview, senior DfID official, London, May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)