

NOREF Policy Brief

Fragile states: a fluid concept for peacebuilding and statebuilding

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Executive summary

The “fragile states” concept is widely used in peacebuilding and statebuilding. Yet the term itself, as well as its use, is the topic of considerable debate. There is no internationally agreed definition of what is meant by fragile states. The term encompasses a number of partially overlapping yet distinct notions and labels. The models that are used to identify, measure, and monitor fragility often compare countries and situations that are so heterogeneous that the value of such comparisons is not clear.

Many critics therefore feel that the term is overly simplistic, arbitrary and based on generalities. It can overlook socioeconomic and historic specificities, and diverse situations within a country and across areas of state rule. It is also often considered pejorative and stigmatising. There is even the concern that the term is simply being used, or “instrumentalised”, to serve the political agenda of “strong states”.

However, what the fragile states debate has achieved is to focus attention on some of the world’s most neglected countries. It has also raised

awareness of the complex web of factors that may contribute to state fragility and the importance of understanding the complicated contexts in which external actors try to intervene. For instance, the concept stresses the linkages between poverty, economic and political governance, security and conflict, and the need for mutually-supportive policies and approaches. By doing so, it has highlighted areas of opportunity for international engagement and acknowledged the many challenges and dilemmas faced.

Furthermore, while it is unclear how and to what extent this debate has shaped existing international policies, or whether it has been effective in activating coherent early response or prevention strategies in deteriorating fragile situations, what it does do is stress the role of the state. In doing so it has focused attention on the role and impact of external policies in support of more effective and resilient states.

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Flaws of an ill-defined concept

Few notions or terms have stirred so much controversy as that of “fragile states”. Meaning different things to different actors, the understanding of what constitutes a fragile state is as varied as the wide-ranging terminology used to categorise the spectrum of fragility. This is in many ways a reflection of the diverse priorities and concerns of different international actors.

The concept of state fragility encompasses a number of partially overlapping yet distinct notions and labels, namely: vulnerability to humanitarian crisis, under-development, political instability, lack of security, lack of legitimacy and authority (as legal and political institutions are either weak, absent or unrepresentative), lack of political commitment of a government to perform its duties (ie, “unwilling governments” or “difficult aid partners”), lack of capacity to deliver on basic services (“poor-performing countries”), and conflict and post-conflict environments.

The concept of state fragility encompasses partially overlapping yet distinct notions and labels.

The terms most commonly associated with fragile states are “weak states”, “failing states”, “states in crisis”, “failed” or “collapsed states”, and represent different degrees on the fragility spectrum. However, these terms can also sometimes

be considered as distinct from the term “fragile states” (eg, “failed states”). Other terms highlight particular characteristics or manifestations of state fragility, for example: “warlord states”, “parallel states”, “shadow states”, “neo-patrimonial states”, “quasi-states”, or “phantom states”.¹

There is a general understanding that fragile states are often characterised by extreme poverty, poor governance, and/or lack of capacity or commitment to provide for the state’s core functions (eg, maintaining security and providing for the rule of law and justice, basic social services, public resource management and economic development). Fragility is also seen as:

- the product of an evolving set of complex and inter-dependent variables and situations, and hence unique to each specific context at a given time. For instance, political analyses of conflict and post-conflict situations often tend to focus on the root causes of conflict, but they also need to consider the political, economic and societal changes brought by war. Conflicts and/or the political arrangements to resolve them generate new dynamics and, as Susan L. Woodward stresses, the root causes of the conflict may not be so relevant anymore in a post-conflict situation;²
- the result of an incremental process, thus leaving some room for early warning and prevention; and
- not a permanent or general condition, as countries can move in or out of fragility, and the fragility may only affect certain parts of a country/region, specific policy areas, or state institutions.

Conflicting models

Nonetheless, such shared understanding does not translate into an internationally agreed definition of fragile states, nor into a single model for measuring fragility, much less into shared views on how the concept can inform operational strategies to best support fragile states.

A variety of quantitative and qualitative models and indexes are used to attempt to identify, measure, and monitor fragility, while some even aim at predicting future instability and state failure. They result in very different lists and rankings of fragile states, because the existing models have been created for different purposes or measure different degrees or dimensions of fragility. These models often compare countries and situations that are so heterogeneous that the value of such comparisons is not clear. In other cases, countries in similar situations are ranked too far apart to be able to understand what it is that justifies such disparate ranking within the same fragility scale.

¹ See, for instance, the definitions and typologies of fragile states and related bibliographic references in: Claire McLoughlin, *Topic guide on fragile states*, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), 2010, <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/CON86.pdf>, accessed 25 May 2011.

² Susan L. Woodward, “Do the root causes of civil war matter? On using knowledge to improve peacebuilding interventions”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol 1, no. 2, pp 143-170, 2007, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789>, accessed 27 May 2011.

Attempts to measure and monitor fragility are also limited by the availability, timing, and reliability of data in states with weak structures, or where the political situation or nature of the regime poses an obstacle to data generation. However, some authors argue that the main problems of these indexes lie in their “conceptual stretching” and “definitional inconsistency”, as the concepts they attempt to operationalise and the data used to measure them are ambiguous and lack properly defined borders. Gutiérrez also observes that the aggregation methods used are often based on the assumption that variables are fully equivalent or of equal weight, which is not realistic.³

Models to measure fragility, like the fragile states concept itself, therefore suffer from similar problems and criticism. They are said to be:

- lacking in objectivity, transparency and “realism” eg, in the way indicators are measured and different dimensions or variables are aggregated or weighted;
- too general and hence not able to capture specificities or underlying dynamics within a country (including at the sub-national level), and therefore not appropriate to guide country-specific interventions;
- too narrowly focused on the state capacity and institutions;
- biased, as they often disregard the role played by external actors/policies in a state’s weakness; and
- reductionist, because they are based on a notion of “one” valid state model – which is very much the model of an “ideal” or “accomplished” state – without acknowledging the history and different trajectories of state formation.

3 For a thorough overview and analysis of indexes measuring fragility, and their strengths and weaknesses, validity, and practical use, see: Javier Fabra Mata and Sebastian Ziaja, *Users guide on measuring fragility*, German Development Institute (GDI/DIE) and UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, 2009, http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs09/Fragility_Users_Guide_%28web%29.pdf; and Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, D. Buitrago, A. González, C. Lozano, *Measuring Poor State Performance: Problems, Perspectives and Paths Ahead*, Crisis States Research Centre Report, February 2011, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Policy/Policy.aspx>, both accessed 29 June 2011.

These shortcomings imply that forms of political or social organisation which differ from the western/Weberian model of state – hybrid institutional and political orders⁴ or varying degrees of statehood⁵ — are not considered. Some authors conclude that the analyses of fragility point more to what is lacking than what actually exists, and therefore these models overlook forms of societal organisation that are actually present.⁶ Fragility is after all embedded in state-society processes (not least in the oldest western nation states); a state is not merely a set of established norms and legal and political institutions, but is also formed by state-society interrelations within a given territory (eg, authority, legitimacy, representation, mediation). State formation is therefore a dynamic process.

Reactions to the political use of “fragility”

International actors, including policymakers, recognise the criticism levelled against the fragile states concept. Instead, some (for example, the EU) refer to “situations of fragility” or to “fragile situations”, while the OECD recognises the need to acknowledge the specificity of each context, the diverse situations within a territory, and the need to look beyond the state. This terminology also avoids using the negative and stigmatising label of “failed”. In fact, some prefer to use the term “resilience” ie, “the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness, or legitimacy”,⁷ calling for greater understanding of what makes some poor states more resilient (in social, institutional and/or economic terms) and which policies can best support resilience.

4 Bertrand Badie, “L’État importé. Essai sur l’occidentalisation de l’ordre politique”, Paris, Fayard, 1992; Volker Boege et al, *States emerging from hybrid political orders – Pacific experiences*, Occasional Paper, no. 11, The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS), 2008, <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:164904>, accessed 27 May 2011.

5 Christopher Clapham, “Degrees of statehood”, *Review of International Studies*, 24, 1998, pp 143-157, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=33557>, accessed 27 May 2011.

6 M. Kraushaar and D. Lambach (2009), “Hybrid political orders: the added value of a new concept”, The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS), Occasional Paper, no. 14, December 2009, <http://dev.issr.uq.edu.au/sites/default/files/14%20-%20Hybrid%20Political%20Orders%20The%20Added%20Value%20of%20a%20New%20Concept%2C%20Maren%20Kraushaar%20and%20Daniel%20Lambach.pdf>, accessed 27 May 2011.

7 OECD, *Concepts and dilemmas of state building in fragile situations. From fragility to resilience*, OECD/DAC Discussion Paper, 2008, p 12, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/59/51/41100930.pdf>, accessed 27 May 2011.

Why then label some states as fragile or acknowledge only some forms of fragility? Many fear that the concept serves above all the political agenda of “stronger states” in justifying interventions in “weaker states” under the pretext of international security and the fight against terrorism. It is this perceived political “instrumentalisation” and abuse of the term that stirs much of the controversy around the fragile states debate. Some authors claim that, instead of focusing on so-called fragile states, the focus should be “on those doing the judging, labelling and intervening – to identify their goals, their actual policies and their openness to listening”.⁸

From the perspective of the developing countries (prime candidates in the rankings of state fragility), there are two main and opposing attitudes to the concept – although they are not incompatible and are sometimes found among the same actors. On the one hand, many see it as an overly simplistic and arbitrary concept based on generalities, which overlooks socioeconomic and historic specificities, and diverse situations within a country and across areas of state rule. There is a particular concern that such a pejorative and stigmatising label (as they perceive it) may discourage aid flows and private investment, and thus further damage the possibilities of addressing some of the root causes of fragility (eg, socioeconomic development). They demand that donors’ assessments distinguish instead between policy performance and the national (and regional) conditions and constraints that mark the historical course of state formation.

Many fear the concept serves the political agenda of “stronger states” in justifying interventions in “weaker states” under the pretext of international security.

well as greater scrutiny of donors’ policies in their countries. For instance, some 14 states in different regions of the world have engaged in a process of monitoring the use of the principles for donor engagement in fragile states or situations, adopted by the OECD countries. Most of them are also part of the “g7+”, an open grouping of countries experiencing conflict and fragility, established in 2008.

However, while such scrutiny is generally welcomed by critical voices of the fragile states political discourse (both in developing and developed countries), some fear that “rentier” or predatory ruling elites in “fragile states” may play on external actors’ fears of state failure or disintegration to gather support or seek to legitimise their rule or grip on power.

Inevitable questions therefore arise as to how useful the fragile states concept really is from a policymaking perspective. Despite all the ambiguity and criticism of the fragile states concept and indexes, the term has stuck in international politics and has actually played an important role in focusing the attention of the international community on some of the most neglected countries and populations around the world. Efforts to improve models for measuring state fragility therefore continue even among the most critical voices, who claim that such measurements are important for decision-making in the current world of globalised politics and remain a valuable tool – though limited and imperfect as any simplification inevitably is – to compare different realities, and as a complement to qualitative research and analysis.⁹

Increased funding and scrutiny of donor policies

Yet, for some poor and weaker states, this increased focus on fragile states poses an opportunity for attracting international attention and funding, as

International actors need to rethink and reorganise

Despite its many flaws and biases – and to some extent precisely because of these, the fragile states debate has highlighted areas of opportunity for international engagement and issues that deserve

⁸ Martina Fischer and Beatrix Schmelzle, eds, *Building Peace in the Absence of States: Challenging the Discourse on State Failure*, The Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series, No. 8, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2009, p 54, <http://www.berghof-handbook.net/dialogue-series/no.-8-building-peace-in-the-absence-of-states/>, accessed 28 June 2011.

⁹ See, for instance: Francisco Gutiérrez et al, *Measuring poor state performance*, Policy Directions Series, Crisis States Research Centre, September 2010, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Policy/Policy.aspx>, accessed 28 June 2011.

greater attention in the international agenda for statebuilding (eg, the impact of external actors on internal dynamics). Yet it has also highlighted the limitations and inadequacies of external actors' role in trying to change or influence what are inherently internal and long-term societal processes.

One of the positive contributions of the fragile states discourse is the notion that *prevention* is possible and that *long-term international engagement* is needed – ahead of and beyond situations of crisis and recourse to humanitarian responses. Observing and measuring the course of “fragile statehood” over time may provide useful insight into how such states perform and which areas of state weakness are most likely to lead to violence. It could also encourage the application of that knowledge in international policies to trigger early and adequate responses. Yet, how much international actors learn from past experiences and analysis, or translate these into adapted policy and political responses, is uncertain.

Equally positive is the contribution of the fragile states concept to highlighting the development-governance-security nexus and the need for coherent responses and coordinated action. The concept has captured and stresses the linkages – although not necessarily omnipresent or linear – between poverty, economic and political governance, security and conflict, and the need for mutually-supportive policies and approaches by the variety of actors engaged. However, many in the development community fear that the security-development nexus discourse has simply contributed to the “securitisation” of development and to the entrenchment of confusion between under-development, fragility, and conflict. This has been especially apparent since 9/11, with an increasing amount of development assistance being used to support shorter-term stabilisation priorities, and political and security objectives.

Greater awareness of local contexts

The fragile states concept has also contributed to greater policy awareness about the complexities and challenges of engaging in some areas, and the need to base external support and interventions on local contexts. This presupposes a good understanding of local dynamics of power, institutions, actors, and processes. It thus stresses the importance of political economy analysis in identifying what strategies are

more likely to work in each context. Although in some cases, donor country or sector strategies have been (re-)defined in light of such analysis (eg, the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) country strategy in Nepal), it remains unclear how far political analysis is a common practice, and to what extent it has translated into change in actual policy and practice.

The fragile states debate has also brought greater attention to the role of non-state actors in peacebuilding and statebuilding, and encouraged people to question and re-think predominantly (if not exclusively) state-centred approaches in fragile states. In many cases the state is largely absent outside of the capital and/or perceived to be controlled by an elite or ethnic group, while societies are fragmented along diverse forms of political and social governance.

A realistic approach must therefore acknowledge the potential role of non-state orders in mediated processes of peacebuilding and statebuilding, and the need for decentralised approaches, as illustrated by the case of Somalia and Somaliland.¹⁰ However, this creates dilemmas for international support, as the recognition of negotiated arrangements and mediated processes at sub-national levels means that a constellation of actors with their respective interests and power struggles – that may not always be focussed on strengthening the state – are legitimised.

The fragile states concept stresses the linkages between poverty, economic and political governance, and security and conflict.

Influence of external actors is limited in the long term

The debate has indeed attracted attention to the shortcomings of international actors' policies and instruments, their engagement and coordination, and their impact in fragile contexts. There is general acknowledgement that the role and influence of external actors is limited in the highly political

10 Volker Boege et al, “States emerging from hybrid political orders”, pp 37-46; Morten Boås and Narve Rotwitt, *Remaking the Somali state: a renewed building-block approach*, NOREF Report, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, September 2010, http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/1350becf14cb330b38abd42904f80613.pdf, accessed 27 May 2011.

and long-term processes of state and societal transformation required in fragile states. Yet peacebuilding and statebuilding agendas are very much shaped by the presence and engagement of international actors, even when internally motivated.

International actors tend to have too many stated objectives, which are both overly ambitious and not sufficiently prioritised, thus creating expectations which exceed what can be realistically achieved (in light of existing conditions and the means available). This often results in the multiplication of structures or processes to advance these priorities, and a long-term vision of what can and should be achieved is notably absent – as little or no attention is generally paid to what kind of state local actors actually want.

For instance, in the case of Guatemala, the absence of debate over a national vision for the state has been identified as a major missed opportunity of the 1996 peace accords and subsequent peacebuilding and statebuilding efforts by the international community.

The debate has attracted attention to the impact and shortcomings of international actors' policies.

As Claudia Virginia Samayoa explains, the problem was not so much the 128 commitments laid down in the peace accords, but the “methodology that

created sector-based commissions that divided Guatemalan society in the process of debate and didn't create a space for discussion about the Nation”.¹¹

Aid agencies pursue inadequate policies

There is also recognition that despite their limited role, especially in the absence of a nationally-owned agenda for peacebuilding and statebuilding, the way in which donors and other international actors channel their assistance matters, as do the policies and actors they support. Aid agencies often pursue inadequate, if not harmful, aid policies and aid delivery mechanisms, often acting as if local institutions operate similarly to their own or completely bypassing them.

¹¹ Claudia Virginia Samayoa, *Challenges and opportunities for statebuilding. The experience of Guatemala, a fragile state*. Paper presented at the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation and Folke Bernadotte Academy seminar on Statebuilding at the heart of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, Brussels, 27 May 2010, available in mimeograph

Nevertheless, aid agencies are often reluctant or unable to change their modus operandi and are motivated primarily by the need to respond to their own nationally-set priorities and benchmarks for development assistance. They are therefore more interested in accounting for aid disbursements, and achieving visible and quick outputs, than in taking greater risks for potentially more sustainable, longer-term results. Furthermore, external actors' lack of coordination, in some cases amounting to conflicting agendas, may neutralise and even undermine peacebuilding and statebuilding efforts.

Conclusions

The concept and terminology of fragile states remains vague and controversial. However, the debate generated has undoubtedly raised awareness of the implications of state fragility. It has also broadened understanding of the intricate web of relations and factors that shape states in different contexts. Furthermore, it has brought attention to the role and impact of donors' activities and international policies in fragile states – and not just to those states labelled as fragile.

Yet a variety of terms and measuring models are being used to describe and measure the contested – though widely used – fragile states concept. This presents an added difficulty to the already major challenge of translating the complexity of relations and factors that affect state fragility into clear operational guidance for those working in such contexts. A clearer definition of what constitutes state fragility, James Putzel argues,¹² would help clarify which areas of “state fragility” are more likely to result in violence and which areas of state activity have actually contributed to “state resilience”. Such knowledge would help focus attention on those areas that matter most and guide external policies and support for appropriate reforms in fragile states.

It is still unclear how and to what extent the fragile states debate has been shaping international policies, or how important it has been in triggering coherent and early responses or prevention in deteriorating

¹² James Putzel, “Why development actors need a better definition of ‘state fragility’”, Policy Directions Series, Crisis States Research Centre, September 2010, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Policy/Policy.aspx>, accessed 27 May 2011.

fragile situations. Or still, what has been the impact of external policies on peace, stability, and statebuilding in such states. What is clear, however, is that the fragile states controversy has focused

attention on the role of the state, and thus on the role and impact of external policies in support of more effective and resilient states.

Further reading

Crisis States Research Centre (CSRC) has produced a number of articles and publication of interest to the topic, which can be accessed in: <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Publications/specialreports.aspx>

Jonathan Di John, "The concept, causes and consequences of failed states: a critical review of the literature and agenda for research with specific reference to sub-Saharan Africa", *European Journal of Development Research*, vol 22, 2010, pp 10-30, <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/ejdr/journal/v22/n1/abs/ejdr200944a.html>

David Chandler, *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking global politics, power and resistance*, Pluto Press, 2009.

Timothy Hagmann and **Didier Péclard**, eds, *Negotiating Statehood: Dynamics of Power and Domination in Africa*, Wiley-Blackwell, July 2011.

Frances Stewart and **Graham Brown**, *Fragile states*, CRISE Working Paper, no. 51, Oxford, CRISE, January 2009, <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper51.pdf>