Fragility: A donor’s concept but not far from reality

Over the last fifteen years, the media have made us familiar with the notion of fragility. Afghanistan, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo … they are among the countries that are labeled ‘fragile’ in newspaper articles and news bulletins. The stories about these countries evoke images of societies in conflict and chaos, where people live in poverty and lack access to the most elementary services. Security and justice are absent. Governments are at best incompetent, but more often they aggravate the volatile situation and are implicated in human rights abuses. These countries are a far cry from what ‘we’, living in donor countries, consider decently organized societies. These countries are dangling at the bottom of the Human Development Index. They need foreign assistance to get their house in order – if there is any hope of that at all.

In this chapter we explore to what extent this media image of fragility is justified, how it relates to policy definitions of fragility, and to what extent the latter have explanatory value to identify the problems of today’s conflict-ridden countries – and seek for solutions.

Fragility: Definitions and reality

As is the case with ‘nation’ and ‘nation-building’, the term ‘fragility’ is not well defined, neither in academia, nor in the world of policymakers and politicians. Using the notion of fragility, or ‘fragile states’, implies that there is a way to measure which state is fragile and which is not, a benchmark model for assessing the performance of states. This is problematic because in the current policy discourse the Western model of the welfare state is implicitly taken as the benchmark. Fragility is thus not merely a descriptive term; it implies a value judgment. The notion of ‘fragility’ emerged as a donor’s concept and is being used in two ways:

1. The measurement approach: The World Bank and the Canadian donors use the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) as the basis

for their assessment. They have a strong focus on public institutions and their economic and financial governance. The World Bank labels any country with a score lower than 3.2 on this multidimensional scale as fragile. Since 2012, the World Bank uses the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission as an additional indicator, thereby including the issue of conflict and violence.

The descriptive approach: DFID and the OECD use a descriptive definition of fragility. DFID labels a state fragile when ‘the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor.’ The core functions include service entitlements, justice and security. The OECD defines states as fragile when ‘state structures lack the political will and/or capacity to provide for the basic functions, needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and the human rights of their populations’.

The countries that are defined ‘fragile’ by donors and policymakers have not been particularly keen on this new label. They have criticized the use of the concept because it is loaded with negative connotations (that is, stressing only what countries are lacking and their inability to perform better) and obfuscates the efforts of countries and governments to overcome the challenges of fragility. These countries responded in 2010 by initiating the G7+ group of fragile and conflict-affected states, which currently has 20 members. The G7+ group is one of the constituent members of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS), an initiative to address the issues of fragility led by fragile countries. They formulated their definition of fragility as follows: ‘A state of fragility can be understood as a period of time during nationhood when sustainable socioeconomic development requires greater emphasis on complementary peace-building and state-building activities.

2 CPIA score is composed out of scores on 21 indicators: Building human resources, business regulatory environment, debt policy, economic management, efficiency of revenue mobilization, equity of public resource use, financial sector, fiscal policy, gender equality, macroeconomic management, policies for social inclusion/equity, policy and institutions for environmental sustainability, property rights and rule-based governance, public sector management and institutions, quality of budgetary and financial management, quality of public administration, social protection and labor rights, structural policies, trade, transparency, accountability and corruption, IDA resource allocation. All indicators are rated between 1 and 6). http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/CPIA (accessed 8 November 2015)
3 http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/Inequality/wp51.pdf p. 2 (accessed 9 September 2014)
5 http://www.g7plus.org/en/who-were-are/member-countries, (accessed 16 September 2014)
such as building inclusive political settlements, security, justice, jobs, good management of resources, and accountable and fair service delivery’.6

The differences between this southern-based definition and the northern, donor definitions of fragility are clear:

– The G7+ definition has no assessment approach that implies a benchmark. Pejorative and judgmental notions like ‘unable’ or ‘unwilling’ are not used.

– The G7+ countries define fragility as a temporary phase in their development and focus on the challenges that need to be tackled in order to leave this phase behind. These challenges include security, justice, jobs and service.

– The G7+ countries define fragility as a phase in their process of building nationhood, while the donor definition does not refer to nationhood but only talks about states.

At the same time, the definition of the G7+ contains similarities with the donors’ definition in stressing inclusiveness of political settlements, the need for security and jobs, the fair service delivery, the accountability and the economic components of jobs and good management of resources. In that sense this definition mirrors people’s reality. During the ten years that I traveled to many fragile and conflict-affected countries, I listened to people and what they believe the state should deliver – and where it falls short. In countries like Afghanistan, Sudan or Haiti, people are looking for a state that values their voice in the political processes, that can provide security, justice and access to basic social services and that creates a physical and institutional infrastructure for a functioning economy. While I believe that the Western political, social and economic model should not be the benchmark to assess and to judge other nation-states, at the same time people across the world have shared expectations about the basic functions a state should fulfill, regardless of the forms, regulations and institutional set-up into which these functions are translated.

A conceptual model for fragility

The Norman Paterson School for International Affairs of Carlton University in Canada identifies three basic competences for the state: Authority

http://static.squarespace.com/static/5212dafbe4b0348bf22a511/t/538e3f65e4b01aecc8314eb5/1401831269g7%20English%20FS%20Note%20Design.pdf (accessed 16 September 2014)
(controlling the territory and able to push through laws and regulations); legitimacy (accepted by the population as representing them and working for their interests) and; capacity (having the instruments and the means to implement policies).7,8

This framework distinguishes between three types of states, each covering two of the three basic competences:

1 States that have control over their territories and are seen as legitimate representatives of the population, but lack the capacities, means, instruments and institutions to fulfill their obligations. Fragility in these states is probably easiest to solve, that is, by securing and building the resources and institutions. Examples are Liberia, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste.

2 States that are legitimate representatives and have capacity to fulfill their obligations, but have no full authority over their territory. Most

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8 The so-called ACL model has three main factors (authority, capacity and legitimacy) and three consequences when two of the three main factors are in place: effectiveness, validity and integrity. For these three consequences see http://www4.carleton.ca/cifp/app/serve.php/1144.pdf p. 37 (accessed 25 January 2016)
of the time part of the territory is under control of rebel groups and the state is not able to get its authority established. Examples are Nigeria and Colombia.

3 States that have authority over their territory, have the power to impose laws and regulations and have the capacity to do so through the resources and institutions they control, but that lack the legitimacy to act on behalf of the population. Even if the governments of such states came into power through elections, these elections were rigged or pressures were so strong that people did not cast their votes freely (also called ‘illiberal democracies’). Examples are Eritrea, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Clearly, the three competences in the above model are interrelated. A country that has no control over its territory most often also lacks sufficient legitimacy because part of the country does not recognize the state as their representative. States that have insufficient institutional capacity will have a hard time exerting authority over their territory. And states that have no capacity will lose their legitimacy because they are unable to provide security, justice and basic social services. While most fragile states suffer from interrelated problems on all three competences, it is nevertheless helpful to distinguish between them in order to address the different aspects and to disentangle the fuzzy concept of fragility. Where does the notion of nation-building fit into this model? I believe it is located in the legitimacy corner of the triangle. Most of the legitimacy discourse is political in nature. It is about political power and about representation of people in the political process. Organizing democratic elections is considered a *sine qua non* for creating legitimacy for a government. However, legitimacy is not guaranteed simply by organizing democratic elections. A country that lacks a shared identity will face a legitimacy problem, regardless of elections. When there is no shared identity it means the state is not owned by part of the population, who do not feel part of the ‘we’. Those who do not feel part of the nation-state are bound to contest laws and regulations and distrust institutions, as these do not reflect their identity and interests.

Fragility is a changing reality. The World Bank publishes an annual list of fragile states. Comparing the 2015 list with that of 2012, we see Mali and Madagascar are newcomers, while Angola and Georgia have left the list. Canada and the US have developed a system that reflects different phases in the process from stability to fragility (or vice versa). The Canadians have introduced fragile, weak, failing, failed, collapsed and recovering states, with each label reflecting different stages of fragility. USAID distinguishes
within the broad category of fragile states between vulnerable states and states in crisis. These attempts to refine the notion of fragility can be seen as reflecting the changing reality and the movement of states on a continuum from outright fragility to clear and undisputed stability.9

The OECD, in its report States of Fragility 2015,10 identifies 67 countries that have appeared on the fragile states list at least once between 2007 and 2015. The list of 2015 includes 50 countries, among which the 'usual suspects' such as Afghanistan, South Sudan and Haiti, but also countries that are, even if not free from risks and threats, generally considered to be in a different league such as Rwanda, Kenya and Bangladesh. The OECD also lists 23 chronically fragile countries, that is, countries that have appeared on all lists between 2007 and 2015.11 This 'core' group of fragile states does not include, however, certain countries that have only recently been identified as fragile (e.g. Syria and Mali) or South Sudan, which only became an independent country in 2011. Some have been on the list and could easily relapse into fragility (Pakistan, Lebanon). Therefore the list will remain flexible with countries appearing and disappearing off the list.

Fragility: Social networks, governments and hybrid political order?

The most problematic aspect of the notion of fragile states is that it puts a blanket of failure on these states, as if structures and institutions are completely absent, people are incapable to act and to change anything, and are fully dependent on external interventions and aid to survive. I wish to list two caveats to this viewpoint.

9 Whereas there is differentiation in the fragility spectrum, there is no such differentiation in the stability spectrum, which underlines the criticism on the benchmark approach to fragility of donors. It seems that the benchmark is a single standard, which overlooks the differences between the Northern, Southern and Eastern member states of the EU.
11 The OECD 'core' list includes: Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Liberia, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Yemen, Zimbabwe. Comparing this list with the membership list of the G7+ reveals the following differences: Cameroon, Eritrea, Kiribati, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria and Zimbabwe are no members of the G7+. The G7+ members Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Papua New Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe are not on the OECD list.
Firstly, if a state is fragile, that does not mean society is not functioning. Fragile states are not a tabula rasa on which the international community can design its blueprint for reconstruction and state-building. During conflict, people survived, although on a minimal basis, thanks to the power of their social networks: Families, tribes, communities, churches. All these institutions proved to be resilient, sharing food and shelter, providing healthcare, giving spiritual support in times of suffering and loss. The power of these social institutions is an important asset in nation-building and state-building. Many state-building interventions by the international community have provoked anger and resentment exactly because they do not value, and often dismiss, these social networks as building blocks for nationhood.

The idea of hybrid political orders developed by Boege et al. builds on this social reality. The notion of fragile states is framed by a Western perspective about the welfare state and the division between state and civil society, each with its own functions. In many fragile states, there is a structure of social institutions that provide important basic services to the people and which operates parallel to the (non-functioning) state institutions. Security, justice and social services are provided by ethnic groups, religious communities and local networks. In such hybrid political orders the boundaries marking what is whose responsibility are not always sharp. The notion of the hybrid political order is helpful as it opens up a new perspective on the agency of people and social structures in fragile states. However, these important social structures and networks should not be taken for granted as the solution to fragility. The outreach of these social institutions is limited, and they are not always inclusive. In fact, the problem of fragility is for a large part caused by a focus on the in-group as the reference. The bonding social capital is not accompanied by bridging social capital. And even in-group cultures may not be inclusive (e.g. women).

Secondly, even if we leave aside society at large and focus on the state-apparatus, there is good reason to be more precise in our analysis of fragility. My own experience in different conflict-affected countries taught me a few things about the diversity in state institutions. Framing a generalized picture of fragile states as fully dysfunctional and not constructive is misjudging the more complex reality and the opportunities for change. I observed a clear distinction between the security-apparatus of the government (presidency, ministries of defense, security services) and other ministries. In Burundi, for instance, I met ministers of health, education, infrastructure and gender

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who were less obsessed with security, were open for new ideas and had a genuine focus on development and social improvement. Often I met civil servants who wanted to move forward, who were not corrupt, and who were really committed to the plight of the poor. The innovation in Performance Based Financing of the health sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo would not have happened without the push and power of civil servants who were creative and committed to introducing and expanding this new funding model.

Another observation is that national and regional governments can markedly differ. Representatives of the regional governments of the province of South Kivu, DRC, who live close to ordinary people and are not encapsulated in the national political coterie, genuinely wish to make a difference in the lives of the people in their province. The Cordaid program for education got a foothold in South Kivu thanks to the provincial ministry of education that wanted to bring about change and realize better results.

Those who focus on the power-holders at the state level may consider the above distinctions within governments of fragile states irrelevant because as long as these power-holders keep their position, nothing will change and processes of state-building and nation-building are bound to fail. From a perspective of social dynamics, however, these distinctions are relevant: Social and political change is always the result of processes and interactions and it is important to identify agents of change, even if at moments their impact on the power structure on nation level is limited.

The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States

The international community’s specific attention for fragile states started around 2007. Fragility affects more than 1.4 billion people worldwide and fragile countries fare significantly worse in reaching the targets of the Millennium Development Goals than the non-fragile developing countries:13

- Poverty. The 50 states and economies on the 2015 list account for only 20% of the global population but 43% of the world’s poor. According to World Bank projections, nearly two thirds of currently fragile countries will fail to halve poverty by 2015. By comparison, only a third of other developing countries will fall short of this target.
- Child survival. Both fragile and non-fragile states have made impressive progress in reducing child mortality. Nonetheless, while 15% of

non-fragile states are projected to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two thirds by 2015, only one fragile state will reach this goal.

- **Education.** Just one fifth of fragile states and economies are on track to achieve universal primary schooling, compared to nearly half of non-fragile developing countries.

- **Water.** Only 28% of fragile states are on track to halve the number of their citizens without access to safe water, while 61% of non-fragile countries have reached this target. Fragile states have also made slower progress on sanitation.14

The British Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in its report *Horizon 2025* analyzes that fragile states will pose the biggest challenge to successful development cooperation.15 The ramifications of fragility on neighboring countries and the international community in general (military/security, poverty, refugees) are too big to ignore.

In response to this reality, the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States was launched at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011. The New Deal is an agreement signed by more than 40 fragile and conflict-affected states, international development partners and civil society organizations to improve current development policy and practice in fragile states. The New Deal calls for five Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs) to be at the forefront of all international efforts in fragile and conflict-affected countries:

1. **Legitimate Politics** – Foster inclusive political settlements and conflict resolution;
2. **Security** – Establish and strengthen people’s security;
3. **Justice** – Address injustices and increase people’s access to justice;
4. **Economic Foundations** – Generate employment and improve livelihoods;
5. **Revenues & Services** – Manage revenue and build capacity for accountable and fair service delivery.16

Goals 2 to 5 are not different from the common goals of the international community’s state-building agenda: Positioning the state as the actor that delivers security, justice, economic development and services. However, the

notion of ‘people’s security’ in the second goal suggests a shift of focus from a state-centric security approach to an approach focused on people. In the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the problem of security as posed by fragile states like Afghanistan and Somalia was framed from a state perspective: How to defend the nation-state against attacks from terrorists? Homeland security became a dominant frame for addressing security issues. In response to that, the concept of Human Security, already developed by the UNDP in its 1994 Human Development Report and adopted as the basis of the UN’s Responsibility to Protect commitment, has been pushed for by the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding as a much more comprehensive approach to security; not only defending the interests of the state but fostering the much broader interests of people, including a well-functioning society with access to justice and social services that create the basis for a life in dignity.

Also interesting is the first goal of ‘legitimate politics’, which aims for political settlements and conflict resolution. It brings in the legitimacy component of the triangle of fragility (figure 1). By identifying conflict resolution as part of legitimate politics, I conclude that the New Deal is willing to position, at least partly, conflict resolution outside the security area. I believe that this is an important step forward. Too often internal conflicts in fragile states are dealt with from an exclusively state security perspective. By pointing to ‘inclusive political settlements’ the New Deal acknowledges that exclusion of certain groups in society is often the reality in fragile states – both cause and consequence of fragility – and stresses the need to find inclusive solutions in a political process. Exclusion processes often have their origin in identity issues of ethnicity, religion or region. Resolution of conflicts related to exclusion takes time due to the internal dynamics and complexities of fragile states. Security and stability require the integration and non-discrimination of all groups in society, which can only happen if societies engage in a process of self-examination leading to a common purpose. International partners must adjust their interventions accordingly.

The fragile and conflict-affected countries that have come together as the G7+, made a clear statement about the nature of their countries’ internal problems in an annex to the Dili Declaration that came out of their inaugural meeting in Dili, Timor-Leste in April 2010. In a paragraph on security they wrote:

We have all dealt with what have often seemed intractable problems and social division. We acknowledged these problems and agreed on the approaches that are necessary to bring peace and security. This includes the need for reconciliation, social inclusion, dialogue, the institution of the rule of law, and for an honest examination of the root causes of conflict and our national mentality. There must be recognition that a change of national mentality is a long process that takes time. As we have all experienced conflict, there was agreement that we can learn from our individual and collective experiences and discuss together how we addressed our problems.

Referring to intractable problems, root causes and a nation's mentality they hint at problems and challenges of a different nature than those that can be solved by mere political, economic or institutional arrangements and interventions. Acknowledging the need for reconciliation and dialogue and recognizing the existence of root causes that have to be examined creates the space for a different approach. Acknowledging that overcoming fragility is a long process reflects the reality that quick fixes do not exist.
Vignette

Blueprints, checklists and formats: Disarmament in the DRC

A couple of years ago the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands hosted an international conference on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These issues were high on the agenda with the civil war in the DRC coming to an end and huge amounts of money being available to finance this difficult part of the transition to peace. The Netherlands had pledged a US$ 100 million contribution to the DDR fund for eastern Congo.

At the conference policymakers, analysts and researchers, mainly from the OECD countries, shared expertise and knowledge. Just a few participants came from the Central African region, amongst them a Congolese civil servant and his Swedish colleague based in the DRC. On the second day of the conference, after eloquent speeches and insightful presentations, they burst out in despair, mingled with anger: ‘What do you expect us to do with all that is designed in ministries and think tanks in the donor countries? We have seen new and more refined checklists, formats and blueprints that tell us what to do with DDR, but nobody cares about the reality. The reality of eastern Congo is that we are satisfied if we can make sure that ex-combatants leave their weapons in their cupboard and do not threaten other citizens’.

The disconnect between the realities of conflict and fragility on the ground and the best intentions of policymakers and analysts is serious and problematic. Policymakers want to offer the best ideas and the most sophisticated tools to solve the complex problems of societies in conflict. Complex problems require complex answers to address all issues that are at stake and to make sure we do not get trapped in unexpected details. And they feel the pressure of domestic constituencies: No parliamentarian in the Western Capitals will be satisfied with a policy without strong wordings about gender, democratic oversight of the military by political actors, anti-corruption measures and reporting and monitoring formats that allow to follow the money and to define outcome and impact. Every minister of foreign affairs or development cooperation will be criticized and taunted if s/he presents his or her policies without these elements. This leads to a complex system with checklists, formats and blueprints that are sent to our embassies and missions in the form of guidelines for the implementation. Accountants use these guidelines to check whether spending has been accordingly. And different research groups, think tanks and policy departments compete with each other to publish better guidelines and more sophisticated tools that are even more in line with the values and principles of good governance.
It is a tragic disconnect. There is no reason not to bring the best we have to solve the problem of fragility and to contribute to the end of conflict and violence. We should not fob off the people in fragile situations with run-down solutions or tools that are imprecise. However, there is no need for an overkill of guidelines and rules that are designed for an ideal world. Fragile states are messy and the dynamics are unpredictable. But what is the right match between the reality on the ground and the values, principles and insights of researchers and analysts?