Epilogue: The challenges of fragility – and the beginning of an answer

The challenges posed by fragility are extremely urgent in the world of today and tomorrow. First of all, because of the large-scale human suffering caused by fragility: Women are unsafe and exploited, children are malnourished and not in school, youth lack opportunities to build their own future, and communities are divided and insecure. The ability of people in fragile states to live dignified lives is severely compromised. The refugee crisis in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, which has been going on for years but only became painfully visible to most people in Europe in 2015, is not the only sign of this unacceptable human suffering. Millions of people suffer from fragility outside of the purview of international media cameras. The challenges posed by fragility are also urgent because in a world of global interdependencies, unstable countries and contexts with increasing inequalities between countries undermine global peace and security. Thirdly, fragility undermines the efforts of the international community to eradicate poverty. Fragile and conflict-affected countries have consistently lagged behind other developing countries in achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (see also chapter 3). This trend is likely to continue with the even more ambitious and inclusive agenda of the Social Development Goals (SDGs) that the world’s governments agreed on at the UN Special Summit in September 2015. Poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected states: By 2030, two thirds of all poor people are expected to live in fragile situations. For the next decade the fragile states will be home to the increasing majority of the people living below the poverty line. The OECD expects that 62% of all poor people may be living in fragile states by 2030, compared to 43% in 2015. Without an effective strategy to address the issue of fragility, the ambitious SDG agenda of zero poverty in 2030 will be extremely difficult to realize.

The fragile-states challenge is aggravated by the increase in the development gap between these fragile states and the stable low- and middle-income countries, which increasingly manage to benefit from processes of development that connect them to the globalizing world. The widening gap will create more tensions: If Rwanda continues to progress and Burundi and the DRC remain stuck in their fragile condition, regional tensions are bound
to reignite. The urgency of the problem of fragility is clear. The international community should generously provide all the necessary resources (human, intellectual, financial, technical) to address this problem as soon as possible. But here we stumble on the reality of fragility: There is no silver bullet, no magic wand to solve this problem.\(^2\) The enormous efforts by the international community in Afghanistan and South Sudan have not been able to make these countries stable or even to prevent new or ongoing conflict. That failure is partly due to limitations on the part of the international community. The Dutch chief commander Dick Berlijn stated in 2007, one year into the Uruzgan mission, that the Dutch government and public should reckon with a time frame of 20 years of presence in Afghanistan. According to his analysis, this was the time realistically needed to stabilize the country and to realize the goals as set by the ISAF-mission.\(^3\) Three years later, however, the Dutch withdrew from Uruzgan due to domestic political conflicts between the two coalition parties (Social Democrats and Christian Democrats). Four years later, in December 2014, the international ISAF mission came to an end. Lack of political and electoral support in the donor countries and unwillingness to bear the ongoing financial burden were the main reasons to end the ISAF mission long before its target of stability was achieved. Or was it the realization that solving the problem of fragility in Afghanistan proved so much more complex than the architects of the 3D approach and instruments had ever imagined? Dick Berlijn was perhaps right with his assessment of a 20-year time frame: Deep cleavages in society that are a result of decades of war and mistrust cannot possibly be resolved by means of a rapid international ‘therapy’. There is no overnight solution for the extremely tricky reality of societies where people who were used to living in rather homogeneous identity groups were suddenly uprooted by war and conflict, and that now face the challenge of becoming a ‘decent’ nation-state in the international family of nation-states. Overcoming decades of war and internal conflict and finding a response for the new challenges of these countries is not something that can be planned or managed through a ‘tick-the-boxes’ process of defining output and outcomes. However, I

\(^2\) Grindle 2007 concludes: ‘Thus, particularly for those engaged in efforts to improve governance in fragile states, there are no magic bullets, no easy answers, and no obvious shortcuts towards conditions of governance that can result in faster and more effective development and poverty reduction. The task of research and practice is to find opportunities, short of magic bullets, for moving in a positive direction, yet recognizing that this is not always possible.’ (p. 572)

\(^3\) http://vorige.nrc.nl/binnenland/article1826976.ece/Dick_Berlijn_blijf_in_Afghanistan (accessed 3 September 2015, in Dutch)
do see a few challenges ahead that can be turned into opportunities for formulating better answers to the dilemma of fragility.

**Broaden the policy scope**

The complex reality of fragility calls for a broadening of the current scope of our policies and interventions. Given the prevalent discourse on fragility this is no easy call. The OECD 2015 *States of Fragility* report sticks to the same model that has guided interventions for the last two decades; at the heart of the analysis are still the weak institutions of fragile states that need to be strengthened. The OECD signals ‘new approaches to fragility’ but this only entails welcoming the inclusion of security and peace within the new SDG Agenda. The mainstream discourse on fragility continues to be dominated by the political economy domain: By building strong political institutions (government, judiciary, military, police) and by investing in the economy, the problem of fragility will be solved. Referring back to the triangle model of basic competences of the state presented in chapter 3, current efforts and innovation are focused on the axis of authority and capacity, with effectiveness as the anticipated outcome. I am convinced this current recipe is not enough.

We need to broaden the scope of strategies, meaning that we must start to include also the third component of the fragility-triangle into our policies: Legitimacy. And this should not be done in a flawed manner of assuming that legitimacy is the automatic result of effectiveness; the importance of legitimacy should be judged for what it is: The missing pillar for comprehensive policies.

Strengthening institutions and capacities is not irrelevant, far from it. People in Afghanistan, the DRC and the Central African Republic want state institutions that function well, take citizens seriously, deliver in an effective and efficient way, and spend the scarce resources properly and fairly. The ideal of good governance is not alien to the aspirations of people in fragile states – there is no need for ‘us’ to convince them of its importance. However, I believe that people in fragile states want to see that this institution building is embedded in a cultural, social and spiritual understanding that they relate to. Moreover, they want acknowledgement of the fact that during war and conflict people survived not thanks to the state but in spite of the state. It is offensive to people in fragile states to ask them to transfer their loyalty from the institutions and communities that

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helped them survive to the state, which proved to be unreliable. According to many people, the state is based not on the sovereignty of the people, but on the support of the international community. It is therefore only reasonable that they want to see a connection between the institutions that helped them survive and the new institutions that claim to be the solution to their country’s fragility. Only if we can link the trust that people have towards the existing, often customary, institutions and the new official institutions, can we begin to find a solution for the problem of fragile states. Bringing in legitimacy as a focal point will put our efforts in a new light. It opens our mind for connections between old and new systems, it brings in the legitimacy of traditional institutions as a basis (not the end stage) for creating stability. In a study of the justice system in Mali, researchers concluded: ‘Accepting that the Malian state does not have, will not have and should not aspire to have a monopoly on the provision of justice for the next few decades is a critical starting point for making improvements to how justice is provided in matters that affect Malians in their daily lives.’

Building on the customary laws of the country should be regarded as an option to build a justice system that delivers to the people and that has a strong legitimacy. The same goes for healthcare: Is it useful to follow a replacement strategy by which traditional healing institutions are marginalized and blamed as outdated and dangerous, or can we build on these systems as a building block for a professional and well-functioning health system? The madrassah school system in Pakistan poses the same challenge for the debate on the education system. Such an approach would value existing systems of ethnic, religious and other identity communities as valuable contributions to the process of building a functioning state. Bridging the gap between old and new becomes a possibility when taking serious the pillar of legitimacy in all efforts to reduce fragility. In this bridging we see the connection between nation-building and state-building, between identity and institutions.


Commit to interdisciplinarity

Tackling the problem of fragility requires a strong alliance between researchers, policymakers and practitioners. I have argued that the central concepts of the fragility discourse (nation, fragility, identity) show a certain fluidity. Combining three more-or-less fluid concepts makes the challenge even more volatile and changeable. The academic concepts need contexts and reality: The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Academia will not solve the conceptual dilemmas any time soon, and the same goes for policymakers and practitioners: In isolation none will find the answer. Working in isolation means accepting an endless process of trial and error: People in fragile states deserve better. They deserve that policymakers, scholars and practitioners do the difficult work of understanding each other, their different frameworks, conceptual approaches, methodologies, time frames and pressures. With this book I call on all of them to start that laborious effort of bridging the gaps to find better answers. It will require ‘deep listening’ and honest conversations. There is an urgent need for such an interdisciplinary approach, which will demand of all – researchers, policymakers and practitioners – an equal dose of continuous, smart and stubborn dedication.

I distinguish three lines of research that should be tackled as much as possible in an interdisciplinary way, involving the knowledge and experience of all actors. On top of that, researchers have their own challenges of multidisciplinarity. Departments of international relations and international politics should eagerly look for their colleagues in other departments like cultural anthropology, social psychology, history, religion and sociology in order to understand the social-cultural and religious dynamics in fragile societies. Based on such an interdisciplinary approach, research is needed about how people understand their national identity: What do people in Afghanistan, Sudan and the DRC understand as the components that make up their national identity? What is their ‘imagined community’? Can they formulate what are essential elements of being an Afghan, a South Sudanese or a Congolese citizen? Are there national historical events, heroes or sacred places that they see as crossing ethnic and religious borders? How do they look at emigrants who fled the country? Without a predefined normative frame of national identity, research should start to understand the elements and components of national identity.

A second line of research could be a series of case studies from a nation-building perspective. What happened in South Sudan between the Naivasha peace agreements of 2005 that brought so much hope and the outbreak of
ethnic violence in 2013? What made the hard-won independence unravel so easily? Why did the unity felt in the struggle against North Sudan dissipate and where were opportunities missed to create a stronger national identity as a bulwark against ethnic conflict? A similar analysis could be made in Mali. The Libya crisis and the pouring of militants and military equipment into Mali after the fall of Khadafy have contributed to the crisis in Mali, but what was missed in the years prior to that? A very relevant case study would be Rwanda and its nation-building strategy after the genocide. Does it work to weed out all references to ethnicity? How strong and how deeply felt is the national identity created by the Kagame regime?

A third line of research could study the relationship between peacemaking, state-building and nation-building as distinct but complementary efforts. What are the points of connection, where do the different processes meet and what are the opportunities to use progress in one (nation-building) as a stepping stone in the other (state-building) and vice versa? Such research could help to maximize the synergy between the different processes.

Policymakers should question the self-evidence of the models they apply for supposedly solving the problems of fragile states. Applying the institutional models of the Western world is not going to build legitimate institutions. Based on the distinction between values, norms and forms, policymakers should open the conversation with their colleagues in fragile states on how values like democracy and accountability are interpreted in their culture and tradition, and which norms and forms are connected to these values. The interplay of democracy and leadership is different in Islamic tradition. Institutions like shariah law and madrassah education should be taken seriously as contributions to the development of justice and education. The Ubuntu tradition can be a valuable contribution to building an inclusive political community. Humility is an important virtue policymakers have to acquire in order to understand what is happening in fragile contexts. Policymakers should also develop their networks beyond the power centers of the political circles in the capital. Second- and third-track diplomacy, connecting to leaders of ethnic groups, religious communities and leadership in regions should be developed more deeply in order to understand and give content to the need for inclusiveness.

International practitioners in multilateral, bilateral and NGO programs can play an important role in this. Their involvement in daily practice makes them well-positioned to translate these practices to the policy level and advocate for them. They can serve as a countervailing power, taking responsibility for challenging the taken-for-granted policies of multilateral institutions. Practitioners should do more in linking their practices on local
and regional levels to national policies. They are often engaged in specific issues of minority communities that need to be connected to the process of nation-building. The process of nation-building requires new intervention logics that find a middle ground between the reality that nation-building escapes the time-bound and result-based models so common in development work, but at the same time requires serious and carefully designed work. Nation-building challenges policymakers and practitioners alike to be, as William Easterly phrased it, searchers, not planners.

**Build the nation-state on solid soil**

The nation-state is not the end of history. Like the Roman Empire, the Caliphate and the Principedoms of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it is a social and historical construct. We see the change happening. The interconnected, globalizing world will have consequences for the nation-state. The establishment of regional multilateral agencies (EU, AU, Mercosur, ASEAN) will have its influence on the mandate of nation-states in the international arena. The increasing power of cities and urban conglomerates will affect from below the role of the nation-state. There is a growing global elite which is not connected to one physical place and has the means and the capital (financial, intellectual, cultural) to live independently from nation-states. All these developments will affect the nation-state.

And yet. Communities and societies need a house to live in. The nation-state is our current house. It needs structures and systems that make us feel at home and comfortable with our fellow citizens. Even though these houses are being constructed differently in time and place, they all should minimally provide us with security, justice, basic social services and a viable infrastructure. We all constantly restructure and refurbish our houses to make them fit for new internal and external developments. This refurbishment does not come without tensions, misunderstanding and differences. But we can manage them if every house is built on solid soil and on solid fundament – to make sure it is sustainable and will not to crumble under our tensions and different designs. Nation-building, creating this imagined community of belonging, is the solid soil and fundament that we cannot do without. The poor and vulnerable of this world need a solid house on solid soil where they can live and flourish. They have nowhere else to go.