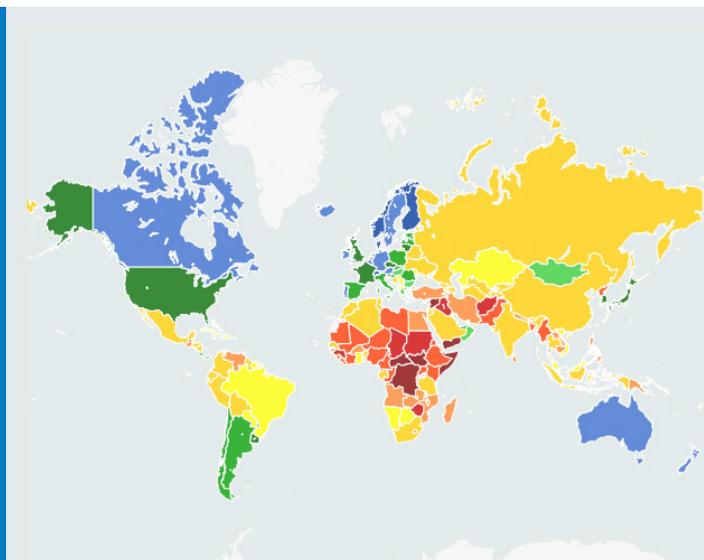


States of fragility: Where to in 2019?

Dominik Balthasar



Fragile States Index 2018. The Fund for Peace

Intro

State fragility has resonated in global public policy-making since the turn of the millennium. Having featured prominently in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, fragility has not only been perceived to lie at the heart of civil wars in impoverished countries. Considered as constituting the ‘source of many of the world’s most serious problems’,¹ fragility has also been deemed a threat to global peace and stability. In defiance of an otherwise fast-paced world of fashionable terms and ephemeral buzzwords, fragility continues to be perceived as ‘the issue of our time’, as noted by World Bank President Kim in his opening remarks to the 2018 World Bank Fragility Forum.² The centrality of fragility in international development agendas is evidenced in economic terms: in recent years, donors spent around 65% of all official development assistance (ODA) in the 58 contexts identified as fragile by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.³

While fragile states remain ‘under-aided’ – as aid flows are excessively volatile, poorly coordinated, and more reactive than preventive – their significance in global public policy-making is likely to increase. According to the recent report ‘Pathways to Peace’, presented by United Nations Secretary General Gutierrez in March 2018, more than half of all poor – and more than 80% of the world’s poorest – will be living in ‘contexts of fragility’ by 2030.⁴ Based on the assumption that fragile states cannot break the vicious cycle of poverty and violence by themselves,⁵ the ‘international community’ has heavily intervened in contexts of fragility. Yet, when taking stock of past efforts geared at tackling fragility, it becomes clear that national and international policymakers have yet to find an adequate approach. Where has the debate on fragility come to stand?

Evolution

Subsequent to a decade-long focus on ‘failed states’ – an ideologically heavily loaded concept – the turn of the millennium heralded a shift towards a more programmatic state-building agenda. This shift was important in at least two ways: first, it marked a break with the ‘good governance’ doctrine of the 1990s, which had led to a significant decline in aid to the poorest countries,⁶ arguably fostering the outbreak of violent conflicts in the global south. Second, it also revived the role of the state in promoting stability and development, after structural adjustment programs implemented throughout previous decades had led to an undermining of the state. Yet, this shift did, by no means, deal a blow to neo-liberal prescriptions for addressing the challenge of fragility. Instead, the agenda evolved in such ways as to move attention from the specific aspect of societies’ vulnerability to large-scale violence to an increasingly comprehensive understanding that came to equate fragility with underdevelopment more generally. The latest OECD ‘States of Fragility Report 2018’ is testament to the ‘conceptual stretching’⁷ that has marked the trajectory of the debate on state fragility, resulting in very general statements that find applicability beyond contexts affected by violent conflict.

Confused definitions

Despite the importance and persistence of fragility in global public policy, the concept has remained confuse(d). This is largely due to the fact that different organizations entertain different definitions of fragility. Yet, there is general convergence in framing fragility in functional terms as a state’s lack of capacity or political will to perform basic governance

functions in the areas of security, rule of law, and basic social services necessary to meet citizens' basic needs and expectations.⁸ Such broad definitions of state fragility are problematic in numerous ways. First, placing emphasis on 'political will', such definitions disguise more than they reveal. Second, such definitions are more reflective of Western-centric normative conceptions rather than an established theory of the state, resulting, not least, in a confusion of causes, consequences, and key characteristics of fragility. Hence, more theory-informed approaches in academia have tended to conceive of fragility in terms of a government's (1) lack of authority in the sense of an absence of the monopoly on the use of force within the state territory, (2) lack of capacity with a view to the provision of basic public services, and (3) lack of legitimacy in the eyes of large parts of the population.⁹ While such conceptualizations are more reflective of the fundamental pillars of statehood, they share the drawback of blurring the line between underdevelopment and fragility. While, by definition, most developing countries 'lack capacity', it is important to differentiate between those poor countries that have maintained peace, and those that have not. To be sure, being able to make just this distinction has been a main rationale for introducing the concept of fragility in the first place.¹⁰

Obscure classifications

As the concept of fragility became more ingrained in development discourse, particular attention was dedicated to assessing, identifying, and monitoring states of fragility. The first to respond to this challenge was the World Bank, which decided to base its fragility classification on their Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA). This index is calculated on the basis of 16 indicators in the areas of economic management (e.g. 'fiscal policy'), structural policies (e.g. 'business regulatory environment'), policies for social inclusion and equity (e.g. 'gender equality'), and public sector management and institutions (e.g. 'efficiency of revenue mobilization'). Any country that scores less than 3.2, has no CPIA ranking, or was the destination of a "peacekeeping" or "peacebuilding" mission of the UN or a regional organisation in the last three years, is considered fragile – resulting in a list of 36 countries and state-like entities for 2019. With the CPIA having originally been initiated in the mid-1970s with the purpose of allocating international development assistance (IDA) funds, a major problem with this measure of fragility obviously lies in its

disjuncture with the conceptual underpinnings of the fragility framework. While strongly featuring the (economic) capacity dimension it wholly neglects the security dimension.

This shortcoming is, somewhat, rectified by the index provided by the Fund for Peace, a US-American non-governmental organisation, which publishes the Fragile States Index in cooperation with Foreign Policy. Here, fragility rankings are calculated on the basis of over 100 indicators grouped into 12 categories in the spheres of politics, economy, social, and security. In its latest ranking, the Fund for Peace considers 32 countries as 'fragile' (i.e. countries falling into the categories 'alert', 'high alert', and 'very high alert').¹¹ Despite a number of ad-

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vantages, also this approach is not flawless. Methodological and operational challenges in quantifying indi-

cators of fragility aside, there are issues with aggregating individual measures, not least as this leads to North Korea and Somalia being categorized in similar terms – even though they face vastly different challenges.

A third, and here last, ranking to be presented is that of the OECD. While, in the past, it compiled its list of fragile states by combining the rankings provided by the World Bank, regional development banks, and the Fund for Peace, it has presented its own index since 2015. Based on a very broad definition of fragility, it analyses political, social, economic, environmental, and societal risks, which can, however, be offset through the respective countries' capacities to adapt ("resilience") in these five areas. Applying a complex statistical method, those countries exhibiting particularly critical constellations are identified. Given the wide-ranging, multidimensional conception of fragility, the OECD list of 2018 comprises a total of 58 fragile contexts. Although the inclusion of middle-income countries, where a significant number of violent conflicts take place, is a welcome improvement over the World Bank's CPIA index, the breadth of this approach calls the analytical value of the fragility concept and respective categorization into question. Even though it is true that natural disasters can destabilize fragile settings, the resulting challenges to peace- and state-building differ vastly from those emanating from human agency.

State of the art

In light of steady conceptual stretching, a heterogeneity of definitions, and divergence in classifications, the foreign policy and development communities continue to grapple with fragility. This is prominently evidenced by the fact that the different lists of ‘fragile states’ put forth by the World Bank, the OECD, the British Department for International Development, and the New Deal¹² together identify some 80 countries as fragile. While this is well over half the total number of countries on the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s aid recipient list of 143 countries, these four lists only converge on 13 countries.¹³ Given such evident confusion about what fragility actually is, the ‘international community’ remains a far cry from understanding how it comes about, and how it can be abated. Even high-level task forces, such as the LSE-Oxford ‘Commission on State Fragility, Growth, and Development’,¹⁴ which brings together a range of eminent scholars and policy-makers, have, unfortunately, little more to offer than broad-sweeping statements that largely echo received wisdom.

Rethinking fragility

Given the centrality of fragility in contemporary and future global public policymaking, one should not throw out the baby with the bathwater and abandon the concept altogether. Instead, new approaches need to be devised that capture and address contexts of fragility more effectively. While there are diverse options to take the debate forward, the following three aspects might be worth considering.

First, in order to develop a common understanding of and more targeted approaches to fragility, it might be worth simplifying and tailoring, rather than further complicating and widening our understanding of fragile statehood. One decisive characteristic to focus on in defining fragility may lie in a society’s vulnerability to or experience of large-scale violence,¹⁵ due to the fundamental difference the presence or absence of violent contestation over the allocation and distribution of power makes for the respective society and its trajectory. If such a security prism is deemed too restrictive, one could, alternatively, conceptualize state fragility as the pervasive lack of institutional predictability across government sectors – with institutions understood as the ‘rules of the game’.¹⁶ There is broad acceptance that fragile states are places where diverse and competing claims to power and logics of order co-exist, compete, and intertwine. Yet, rather than embracing such institutional plurality and celebrating rule diversity,¹⁷

(inter)national approaches should be geared at replacing the multiplicity and volatility of the prevailing rule frameworks with greater degrees of unity and predictability. Such an understanding of and approach to state fragility would be much more aligned with classical accounts of state-building.

Second, in redevising our approach to fragility, it might be worthwhile considering that fragility may be less about institutions themselves, but may have more to do with the relationship between the institutional framework and the identities entertained by individual members of a given society. Cognitive psychology understands that people form ‘mental models’ to make sense of and interact with their environment.¹⁸ The more these mental models and the identities they give rise to converge with the dominant ‘rules of the game’, the more resilient they are. In other words, the norms and role relationships devised by institutions are more likely to survive in face of (internal or external) shocks, the more people identify with, and, by extension, maintain such a rule system. Yet, if such a ‘soft copy’ of the institutional framework is non-existent amongst the members of a given society, institutional break-down is a likely consequence of systematic shocks. Consequently, the forging of joint (political) identities is likely to necessitate as much attention than the building of institutions in order to enhance states’ resilience.

Third, when rethinking fragility, it could be beneficial to move away from a negative understanding of fragile statehood in the sense of conceiving of fragility as a shortcoming in authority, capacity, and / or legitimacy vis-à-vis the yardstick of the (hypothetical) Weberian state. Rather, it might be valuable to also take these societies’ unique strengths into consideration. Just as ‘strong’ states are not strong in every respect, fragile states have more to offer than frailty. Along the lines of Granovetter’s insight that weak interpersonal links may exhibit particular strength, the fragility debate is likely to benefit from more serious thinking about the ‘strength of weak states’.¹⁹ While (formal) institutions may well not constitute their strong suit, they are prone to appear in different light when viewed at through a network prism, for example. Constituting the cradle of institutions, personal relationships – and networks by extension – tend to be exceptionally strong in contexts of insecurity and unpredictability. Hence, more focus might need to be put on the myriad ways in which societies organize themselves even in the absence of formal state structures. Building on social networks as well as other sizable traits of fragile states might be worth considering when taking the fragility debate to the next level.

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Conclusions

Two decades into the debate on state fragility, the concept remains elusive – and so do adequate responses to tackle fragility effectively. Nonetheless, some progress has been made in both academic and policy communities, not least with a view to the realization that that neither all good nor bad things go together in contexts of fragility and resilience. In going forward it might be worth recalling that fragility is not abnormal, as today's most peaceful and advanced economies were in fact "fragile states for most of their historical trajectory".²⁰ Rather, it appears to be a standard concomitant of state-building processes, in which prevailing institutions are questioned, challenged, and possibly replaced with alternative rule systems. Although such changes pose enormous difficulties to the societies affected, they also constitute promising opportunities for greater peace and resilience.

^[1] Fukuyama, F. 2004. "The Imperative of State-Building." *Journal of Democracy* 15 (2):17-31, p. 17.

^[2] Kim, J.Y. 2018. "Opening Remarks by World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim at the Fragility Forum 2018." Washington, DC: World Bank.

^[3] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2018. *States of Fragility*. Paris: OECD, p. 116.

^[4] United Nations and World Bank 2018. *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. Washington, DC: World Bank, p. xvii. See also OECD, op. cit..

^[5] Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2018. "Fragile Staatlichkeit - Eine Herausforderung für die Entwicklungspolitik." <https://www.bmz.de/de/themen/fragilestaaten/index.html>.

^[6] Cf. World Bank 1998. *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why?* New York: Oxford University Press.

^[7] Collier, D., and J.E. Mahon 1993. "Conceptual "Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis." *The American Political Science Review* 87 (4):845-55.

^[8] Swiss Development Cooperation 2019. "Fragility and violence impede poverty reduction." <https://www.bmz.de/de/themen/fragilestaaten/index.html>. *Review* 87 (4):845-55.

^[9] See e.g. Stewart, F., and G. Brown 2010. *Fragile states*. Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity. And Call, C.T. 2011. "Beyond the failed state: Toward conceptual alternatives." *European Journal of International Relations* 17 (2):303-26.

^[10] Putzel, J., and J. Di John 2012. "Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States." London: Crisis States Research Centre.

^[11] Fund for Peace 2018. *Fragile States Index 2018*. Edited by J.J. Messner. Washington, DC: Fund for Peace.

^[12] The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States is a key agreement between fragile and conflict-affected

states, international development partners and civil society to improve current development policy and practice in fragile states. It was signed by more than 40 countries and organizations at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011.

^[13] Maxwell, S. 2018. *Re-thinking the concept of fragile states*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

^[14] Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development. 2018. "Escaping the Fragility Trap." London: LSE.

^[15] Putzel, J., and J. Di John 2012. "Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States." London: Crisis States Research Centre.

^[16] North, D.C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Political economy of institutions and decisions. Cambridge: CUP.

^[17] See e.g. Böge, V., A. Brown, K. Clements, and A. Nolan 2008. *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'*. Berlin: Berghof Research Centre.

^[18] E.g. Denzau, A., and D.C. North 1994. "Shared Mental Models: Ideologies and Institutions." *Kyklos* 47 (1):3-31.

^[19] Granovetter, M. 1974. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6):1360-80.

^[20] World Bank (2017). *Governance and the Law*. Retrieved from Washington, DC: World Bank.

About

[Dominik Balthasar](#) is a senior researcher at [swisspace](#), and lecturer at the University of Basel. His work focuses on issues pertaining to governance and the role of conflict therein. Previously, Dominik worked for different think tanks in Europe and North America, and consulted with a range of development organizations in Africa and Asia. He holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author only.

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