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Broken Promises: The Fragility Gap and the Millennium Development Goals

A Policy Update Paper

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At the recent UN summit to evaluate progress made towards the millennium development goals (MDGs) in September, donor countries have been told that the goals are achievable by their 2015 target date if they scale up their efforts and financial commitments and improve the way they deliver aid. The outcome document, *Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, provides a long list of steps that need to be taken in order to get there, including important commitments for women's and children's health and several other initiatives to continue the fight against poverty, hunger and disease. As Canadians, it is nice to know that the UN has embraced the Muskoka initiative for maternal and child health that was established at the G8 Summit in June, and after Prime Minister Stephen Harper's speech at the UN also hailed its adoption by the G8.

But unless we start thinking more coherently about fragile states, where most of the MDG's are way off-track, our next stock taking *rendez-vous* may prove to be quite disappointing. We already know which fragile states are priorities. Now we need to find a way to engage them. Indeed some have advised that we put our stock in those countries that show effective governance and leadership. This policy could easily lead to an increasing gap between those most fragile and those moving up the development ladder. Fragile states are by definition those countries with poor policy environments that are either unwilling or incapable of effective change.

Engaging fragile states is a global problem. The International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF), a body of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), uses a compilation drawing from the World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, the Brookings Index of State Weakness in the Developing World, and the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) index, and comes up with 43 fragile states. Among them are the usual suspects such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, the Sudan and Somalia, but also lesser known ones such as the Solomon Islands, Djibouti, Kiribati and Tonga.

More than half of these countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa. Taken together the 43 fragile states listed by INCAF account for close to one billion inhabitants, or roughly 15% of the world population. Interestingly, the problem of the "bottom billion countries", which Paul Collier describes, is very similar to the challenges facing fragile states.

We now know that none of the countries inhabited by the bottom billion will meet any of the MDGs by 2015 if the current trends persist, even though a considerable amount of resources have gone towards them in the past two decades. Even where gains have been made there is a continuing danger; so long as stability eludes such states, small gains may be wiped out at any time by instability, governmental failure, or conflict. As another reminder of what state fragility can do, consider the cases of Haiti and Pakistan, which have been consistently ranked among the most fragile states for decades and that both made headlines this year when they were hit by natural disasters. Despite massive amounts of aid being poured into these two countries by the international community over the years, they lack the capacity to respond to even the most basic needs of their populations in times of crisis. These states thus represent an important threat to the overall MDG campaign.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are important measurement issues and a lack of reliable data for the several objectives, targets and indicators representing these MDGs, we have also known for some time already what was happening globally. The main message reads something like this: "There has been progress but it has been very uneven; most of the goals will not be met, and the one that we have been fixated on – namely the halving of poverty – will likely be met due to impressive growth rates in China and India over the past decade." And let's not forget that the MDGs are global targets that even if achieved or approached may be quite different from what is happening at the regional or country level. Furthermore, China and India have not, comparatively speaking, been large recipients of foreign aid.

The most disappointing aspect of the UN summit is the fact that the outcome document barely mentions conflict and fragility. Even though reference is made to the special characteristics and uniqueness of landlocked countries and small island developing states, as well as the challenges facing Africa and the LDCs, there is no overall and coherent strategy for the group of countries considered fragile. This lack of strategy is not unique. For example, the “Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States” produced as part of the OECD Learning Advisory Process (LAP) acknowledges that a secure environment is a necessary prerequisite of effective aid, but gives very little indication of how this might be achieved.

There are, of course, a number of other important concerns emanating from fragile and failed state environments. Though not always included in the fragile states literature, the report “A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility,” drafted by the UN’s *High Level Panel On Threats, Challenges, and Change* offered perhaps the most complete justification currently extant for international engagement in fragile states. In its account of the most pressing threats to national and international security the panel goes beyond traditional concerns of interstate conflict and includes, “economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; internal conflict, including civil war, genocide and other large-scale atrocities; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons proliferation; terrorism; and transnational organized crime.”

All of these threats are particularly likely to emerge in fragile and failed states and any truly comprehensive strategy must take them all into account. Though many nations’ policies mention these other important considerations in failing and failed state environments, few specify how such factors can be systematically incorporated into fragile state analysis and policy. This is a challenge that we have taken up in our research over the past few years.

In moving forward, an important first step would be to begin allocating our aid more effectively to these countries. In 2008, net official development assistance or aid to these 43 fragile states amounted to more than U.S.\$ 41 billion. As usual, the devil is in the details; the top 5 recipients of aid (namely Iraq, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, West Bank and Gaza, and Sudan) make up more than half of the total aid allocated even though they represent only about 20% of the population living in fragile states.

Not only is aid highly concentrated to these countries, indicating the presence of “aid darlings” as well as “aid orphans”, it tends to be extremely volatile, further undermining its effectiveness. More importantly, aid can, in some cases, be much higher than what the countries can absorb, thus creating a real possibility of diminishing returns to our investments. Several of the fragile states are already in the zone of potentially negative returns, pointing to the need for donors to work more carefully with these recipients as efforts are made to ramp up aid flows to achieve the MDGs.

As a second step, we need to recognize that countries tend to become fragile and fail for different reasons and that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. For example, when we examine countries in terms of different characteristics of ‘stateness’ such as their legitimacy, or capacity, or how they perform along different clusters (such as economics, governance or human development), we find that although some states are weak along virtually all dimensions, for most of them, the situation is more complex, with states showing elements of both stability in certain aspects and fragility in others. Such a finding, together with the fact that fragility is persistent, highlights the need for country-specific approaches for policy-makers and a need for continuous assessment and monitoring.

Third, we need to begin to think more seriously about the timing and sequencing of policies in fragile contexts. In the current and ongoing work that we are pursuing, we have found that rapid changes in authority structures tend to be key drivers of instability in the most fragile countries and such changes are independent of poor capacity structures. This indicates a need for a multi-pronged approach that targets individual weaknesses with separate instruments, as opposed to say, focusing on security and hoping that development will follow. On the other hand, in cases where fragility is not extreme, targeting certain areas may create positive feedbacks for other vulnerable areas.

To conclude, the policy community should start thinking of fragile states policy as we would the monitoring of chronically ill patients in intensive care units. It is a long term process with no guarantee of success. Simply put, given the dynamic and complex nature of fragility, systematic and regular monitoring, in combination with deep risk analysis are prerequisites for appropriate and sustainable action. Its time for policy makers from all countries to engage in serious discussion about the future of the most fragile states in the world and, more importantly, how to engage them if we want to have a realistic chance of making progress towards the MDGs.

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