

International Security

Preventing failed, fragile states

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As we all know, failed and fragile states have moved to the top of the policy “leaderboard” in recent years.

A number of resource-intensive initiatives have been launched to confront the various problems these states pose, and though there are “only” 30 to 40 fragile states in the world, they do attract a fair amount—some might say a disproportionate amount—of our attention in terms of our time, energy and money.

But what exactly are the problems that make these countries uniquely fragile and so difficult to fix?

First, there is the development or economic capacity problem. Populations living in fragile states are further from achieving the Millennium Development Goals than any others on the planet.

Among all developing nations, though they comprise roughly one-sixth of the world population, fragile states by various definitions account for over 30 per cent of the absolute poor, over 40 per cent of the children that do not receive a primary education, almost 50 per cent of the children that die before their 5th birthday, nearly 40 per cent of maternal deaths, over 40 per cent of those living with HIV/AIDS, and 35 per cent of those lacking safe drinking water.

Second, there is the authority problem, namely the inability to control both people and territory. Since the end of the Cold War, fragile states have overwhelmingly been the locus of much of the world’s violence, both conflict-related and otherwise.

Today, however, politically motivated civil conflict is not the only source of violence and instability in fragile states; fear of criminal and drug-related violence has come to dominate these states and their neighbors, surpassing concerns regarding terrorism, civil war, and international conflict.

Finally there is the legitimacy problem. When it comes to practicing effective governance, most fragile states lack the legitimacy to be effective and responsive policy makers. To be sure, while there are still some deeply entrenched and often predatory regimes among those states we call fragile, most simply reflect a disengaged population weary of governments incapable of providing basic services and a legal system that makes contractual relationships, property rights and respect for human rights untenable.

Most fragile states simply lack the institutional architecture for consolidated and sustainable political competition that ensures elites are answerable to the people they serve.

In sum, because of economic underdevelopment, a lack of political authority and poor legitimacy, fragile states function in a “gray zone” wherein donors are both uncertain and unclear on how, where and for how long they should engage such countries.

With funds from the Canadian International Development Agency, we set out to provide answers to these questions and published the results with our co-author Stewart Prest in a book called *Security, Development and the Fragile State: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Policy*. In it we emphasized the multi-dimensional and multifaceted nature of the “fragile state problem” and highlight the need for continuous assessment and monitoring of countries at risk in order to be able to intervene before they begin to fail or collapse completely.



states are aid darlings and aid orphans.

Some of the aid darlings are vastly over-funded with respect to their capacity to absorb these funds. In fact, it may well be that withdrawal of these funds would bring about the collapse of some states, so dependent are they on external resources to keep them propped up.

For example, with the announcement of \$10 billion in aid, Haiti is on the verge of also being over-funded, meaning that there will be a real possibility of diminishing returns on our investments.

Fourth, and related to the third point, our research on aid effectiveness in fragile states has shown that absorptive capacity and diminishing returns to aid are real possibilities. Countries with weak policy and institutional characteristics face a real challenge in effectively absorbing large amounts of aid over short periods of time. The macroeconomic impact of aid on growth declines with fragility, and this effect is especially important in low- and lower-middle income countries.

Rather than providing more aid, we would be better served by focusing our attention on providing more “effective” aid, an idea we will clarify in subsequent columns.

Fifth, when we examine the most severe cases of fragility, we find that rapid changes in authority structures in the face of chronically poor capacity scores are key drivers of instability. The independence between changes in authority and capacity indicates a need for specific instruments targeting individual weaknesses, as opposed to, say, focusing on security and hoping that development will follow.

However, for second-tier countries, where fragility is not as extreme, we find that strategic timing might work by targeting a particular area, which may then create positive feedbacks for other weak areas. More generally, interventions need to be context specific and timed properly and strategically.

The evidence we have gathered in pursuit of a more concrete and effective approach to state fragility is driven in part by a new understanding of the world in which Canada must learn how to survive. The evidence suggests we must be forward-looking and be prepared to act preventively.

If the first two decades following the end of the Cold War clearly demonstrated that robust military interventions were essential to dealing with the most egregious cases of state failure, then the next decade is surely our opportunity to move from this reactive stance to a preventive one. As we begin to better understand why and how states fail, we know that the onset of conflict and armed violence is but a late-stage symptom in a larger set of deeper underlying structural processes. And it is on those processes that we must focus our attention.

There is a pressing need 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.

Just as considerable resources are continuously invested in fixing failed and collapsed states, so too is there an ongoing belief that such policies are sufficient and appropriate. Given what we now know about fragile states and the costs associated with fixing them, this is a policy that is unsustainable.

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We provide evidence that neglecting fragile states is extremely costly in terms of poverty and well-being, and in terms of the negative impact on neighboring countries and the international community. We also find a disconcerting upward trend in fragility over time. In particular, there is a widening gap between the most fragile states and the rest of the world.

As an example, consider the case of Somalia, where years of neglect by the international community have resulted in a collapsed state. The ensuing acts of piracy are now very costly for world trade. The emergence of terrorist cells also pose obstacles to global security.

Somalia’s fragility has actually worsened over the last few years and it joins other countries such as Haiti, Zimbabwe, Yemen and the Congo among the worst performers in 2010.

In engaging with fragile states, it is obvious that Canada, other donors and international organizations have an important role to play. But the most important role for us and our allies is not on the resurrection and rehabilitation side of the equation, but on the prevention side, where long-term strategic analysis, the careful application of structural resources and diplomatic engagement are all essential.

Far too often, policy interventions take place after a state collapses. A less reactionary approach means the proper, timely and expedient targeting of resources in advance of volatile situations. Here are some findings from our existing research to support that conclusion.

First, based on our project’s country rankings (see www.carleton.ca/cifp), we find that

fragility tends to be very persistent. More than half of the 40 most fragile states in 1980 were still on that list in 2007. Interestingly, some of these persistently fragile countries include several of CIDA’s countries of focus, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Haiti, Pakistan and the Sudan.

Two things become clear: long-term engagement in the range of about 20 years or more is required before stability and development can become sustainable, and small gains made in some periods can be

quickly wiped out, thus pointing to the need for continuous assessment and monitoring.

Second, our examination of fragility shows that a country’s level of development in terms of basic per capita income is a highly significant determinant of fragility. To be sure, other factors such as political regime type

and trade openness matter, hence the multifaceted nature of the problem.

But growth matters more because successful development strategies that translate into higher income levels can be extremely powerful inhibitors of fragility. The multifaceted aspect also means that policy-makers need to pay attention to the core properties of states, namely their authority, legitimacy and capacity, as described above.

Third, our research on aid allocation to fragile states shows that the most fragile states tend to be under-aided as a group when compared to other aid recipients. However, within the group of, let us say, the top 20 or top 40 most fragile

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