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Understanding State Fragility: A 'Tripartite Approach' to Debating Canada's Engagement

By [Governance Village](#)
[Dec10, 2008](#)

Summary:Last month a diverse array of 'government, civil society and engaged scholars' came together at Carleton University to debate approaches toward fragile and failed states. Participants had the opportunity to engage in a frank, wide-ranging discussion on how Canadian policy can move forward in places like Somalia, Sudan and, most notably, Afghanistan.

BY BRANDON CURRIE
GV Content Editor

OTTAWA - With an ever-growing list of fragile, failing and failed states - there may now be up to 50 considered 'fragile' worldwide - some of Canada's top thinkers, policy-makers and practitioners gathered for a day-long conference at Carleton University on November 25 to discuss the way forward for our collective response.

"First of all, it's a good time to do this," opened Edward Jackson, associate dean of research and graduate affairs at Carleton, citing both the challenge of the worldwide economic downturn and hope of a new American president as touchstones for policy

economic downturn and hope of a new American president as touchstones for policy debate. "30-50 states can now be considered fragile, representing 14 percent of the world's population. 10 years ago some might not have thought of Zimbabwe as a failed or fragile state. Mexico, now, is fighting a war with drug gangs that is putting it on the precipice of fragility. Pakistan's elite are worried about the country breaking up because of outside interference. This is a dynamic field to say the least - clear and accurate data analysis is crucial going forward."

Speaking to that need was David Carment, a NPSIA professor and principal investigator for the [Country Indicators for Foreign Policy](#) (CIFP) project - the recipient of Carleton's Public Affairs Research Excellence Award in 2008 (and also the topic of an [e-Dialogue](#) right here in Governance Village). CIFP ranks country performance on a number of structural and dynamic data, then produces briefs designed to influence policy-making. "So much of academic research does not meet the needs of policy-makers in a practical way," Carment explained. "We're trying to make analysis relevant to policy-makers. So we've been producing reports and briefs that, at face value, meet the needs of desk officers and other decision-makers."

One of the more controversial aspects of Carment's research is that he does not always correlate democracy with good governance. "The most fragile states tend to vacillate between authoritarian and democratic structures. Conversely, ones that are less fragile tend to have fairly authoritarian structures. Maybe that doesn't surprise you. We're trying to break through the assumption that democracy is the answer here. One has to dig a little deeper," he said.

Similarly, Carment also argued that a lack of armed conflict is also not necessarily an indicator of stability. "Now we're facing a different sort of fragility, one where problems that beset these nations are not necessarily associated with armed conflict or violence... It's interesting to look at our results; countries you wouldn't consider to be failed, let alone fragile, are showing up as having serious problems." Interestingly, Carment views the CIFP project as way of not only changing conditions on the ground in the countries CIFP ranks, but also of how our own government evaluates its programming and makes decisions. "A good chunk of what we're trying to accomplish here is attitudinal change within the government. Let's put the analysis front and centre and let that determine policy options... Some of the data may appear crude, but when it comes to making yourself relevant to the government there's a fundamental trade-off between simplicity over complexity."

And leading government representation at the event was keynote speaker Margaret Biggs, the newly-appointed president of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). "I am not the world's leading expert on failed and fragile states," Biggs admitted, "but I have had my deep immersion into CIDA over the past four months and I do know how

policy gets made as I had this extended purgatory in the [Privy Council Office] for five years... so this is a chance for me to pull some thinking together and tell you where we're going with fragile states at CIDA."

Though her self-effacing attitude towards failed states was belied though a detailed historical narrative of Canada's 'Whole of Government' approach - started in the Balkans when the need for defence, development and diplomacy first started to intersect - Biggs was forthcoming in the need to do better in Canada's flagship aid recipient countries: Haiti and Afghanistan.

"Haiti... Haiti's still with us. We started a while back and if you look back over our engagement there, what we learned is you have to be big enough, think big enough, move fast enough and be coherent and consistent enough to really make a difference. We still have a ways to go on that.

"Afghanistan does loom large, partly because we're there now but also because we see evidence of the Government of Canada really trying to get its act together, if I can put it that way. It's trying to do things it's never tried to do before... This is a huge leap forward... but you wouldn't want to do it everywhere in the world, believe me."

Other contributions during the morning session came from Tag Elkhazin, a seasoned development consultant who stressed the need to do conflict mapping in failed states, Michael Weickert, a program leader with World Vision who usefully explained the development tools used by NGOs in fragile environments, and Nipa Banerjee, a professor at the University of Ottawa and former CIDA practitioner who criticized the mission in Afghanistan as undermining the legitimacy of the Karzai government in Kabul.

In the afternoon, a 'Whole of Government' panel was assembled with Charles Morrissey, a security analyst with the Department of National Defence, Shawn Barber, a director of conflict prevention and peacebuilding at Foreign Affairs and Martin Benjamin, a policy development director at CIDA.

Unsurprisingly, discussion largely focused on how Canada can or should continue to integrate its various agencies when operating in a theatre like Afghanistan. Critics of the so-called 'Whole of Government' approach questioned the appropriateness of having development and humanitarian assistance "under the same tent" and the military and diplomatic arms of the mission. The government officials, for their part, defended their strategy by saying that coordination was necessary in a chaotic and unstable environment such as that in Kandahar Province.

"In the context of Afghanistan, we're not in 'post-conflict', we're in conflict. Just because

our Defense colleagues sit down at the same table with us, it doesn't mean they abandon their perspectives or priorities. The key is how can we integrate our respective priorities... because you can't do development in unstable environments. Humanitarian assistance is a different issue and I agree there is a real debate that can be had about humanitarian space and the need to preserve that... But there's a lot of hypocrisy on the part of humanitarian NGOs about this. They'll say one thing in peaceful Ottawa and they'll get into downtown Kandahar and it's a different story," Barber said.

By the end of the day, another theme that emerged was Canada's limitations effect change in fragile states. Coming back to his analytical tool, David Carment said that we have to accept that, as Canada, we can't do everything we might like to. "We need to match the capacity of the end user to the analysis we provide. People say 'we're not doing enough in Sudan.' Well maybe what we're doing is actually within the range of our capabilities. Problem is, people think it's an all-or-nothing situation. We either intervene or we're accused of doing nothing."

"We need to approach these fragile states with a great deal of humility in our ability to change them fundamentally. We are ultimately not going to affect the trajectory of Haiti and whether it persists as a fragile state. That's for the Haitian leadership and hopefully people to decide. We can help on the margins, but without political will in Port-au-Prince, it's a real question mark," Barber added.

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