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# Engaging Fragile States: Closing the Gap between Theory and Policy

DAVID CARMENT AND YIAGADEESEN SAMY

*David Carment is professor of international affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, and a fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI). Yiagadeesen Samy is an associate professor of international affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. The material in their paper is based on several years of research that the authors have conducted through the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) project ([www.carleton.ca/cifp](http://www.carleton.ca/cifp)).<sup>1</sup>*

“Fragility” is not a term typically applied to countries as dissimilar as North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Honduras. Yet each, much like Tolstoy’s unhappy family, is fragile in its own unique way. Saudi Arabia ranks poorly in our basket of legitimacy standards, which includes measures of gender equity, political representation, human rights and the rule of law, as well as others. North Korea, in contrast, is a poor performer in political and social development, and Honduras is plagued by internal turmoil, gang-related violence and other internal challenges to its authority structures. A more typical selection of high-ranking fragile states might include the likes of Pakistan, Somalia and Haiti, and indeed, these are countries that suffer from weaknesses in multiple areas of economic, political and social performance and do in fact score highly in most rankings of fragility. (In such rankings, a high score or placing means, of course, that a country is a poor performer.)

## Varieties of Fragility

In comparing these two sets of examples, we can see that some states more easily fit our notion of what we think a fragile state should be. There are, on the one hand, countries that have typically reached a terminus of complete collapse brought on by “man-made” calamity such as civil war or a mismanaged economy exacerbated by environmental degradation. These are states which, despite international efforts, are utterly incapable of managing their political and economic space. One such example is Haiti, which received close to US\$9 billion in foreign aid between 1960 and 2008. Before the 2010 earthquake hit, Haiti was ranked 149th out of 182 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index, with more than 70 per cent of its population living on less than \$2 a day. Its GDP per capita in 2008 of US\$1,087 was roughly half of what it was in 1980, and life-expectancy was only sixty-one years.

In contrast to the perennially poorly performing Haiti, consider North Korea, a country ranked in

the middle of the overall fragility index pack of the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP). However, when its fragility is calculated solely on measures of legitimacy, the country does much worse. Given North Korea's isolation, such a finding has a high level of intuitive appeal. With its low level of legitimacy, the "hermit kingdom" might be termed "brittle"—endowed with sufficient authority and capacity to maintain control of state borders and territory, but highly vulnerable to exogenous shocks.

In brief, what we have described here are two slightly different ways of understanding fragility. And for all our aspirations to greater specificity, we must recognise that the term "fragility" remains a heuristic—a way of capturing and integrating a number of distinct academic and policy interpretations in a somewhat more cohesive and coherent whole. More specifically, fragility can be understood as a composite measure of all aspects of state performance, producing a ranking that would be most closely associated with those countries that are typically "failed" at the top of the list. This would be a list that most policymakers and academics would recognise, and indeed, if one surveys the vast literature on fragility and the various rankings available, it is clear that such lists do not vary much in terms of which countries appear at the top.

Typically, thirty to fifty so-called "most fragile" states appear on these lists. Most are experiencing or have experienced large-scale violence, and most suffer from what we would call internal challenges to their authority structures. On the other hand, fragility is also an unfolding and ultimately indeterminate process associated with a subset of performance standards. Saudi Arabia may indeed rank poorly according to our legitimacy measures but it also scores much better in other core areas of state performance. While the former composite measure provides us with a general portrait of which countries might be considered strong or weak performers overall, the latter subset of measures provides us with specificity regarding key structural weaknesses.

More generally, the economic capacity problems that beset the fragile states of sub-Saharan Africa are distinct from the legitimacy and authority problems of the fragile states of Central and South Asia. In our country rankings, Pakistan and Sri Lanka exhibit poor performance on measures of authority and legitimacy, while middle performers in Africa such as Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania are faced with economic capacity problems. Those that show up repeatedly at the top of our rankings, that is, the worst performers, are those that face challenges in all three categories of authority, legitimacy and capacity (ALC).

The rest of our paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we present the methodology we use to conceptualise fragility, as well as the different types of information—quantitative and qualitative—that are helpful for programming in fragile contexts. We then make a case for external intervention in fragile states, after which we discuss some of the challenges that result from intervention. We conclude with some recommendations.

## Methodology

Our definition of fragility rests upon conceptualisations and measures that are relative. Some states may be strong by one measure and weak by others. We argue that the proper referents for understanding state fragility are not only a state's own past, present and future performance in

absolute terms but its performance relative to other states at any given point. The rate of change, which is understood by examining a state's relative performance, as opposed to absolute performance, whether progressive or regressive, tells us whether a state is moving towards increasing fragility or whether its situation is improving. In other words, structural characteristics and measures of performance are useful for understanding state fragility only if there are appropriate reference cases from which to compare. And since these reference points are themselves evolving over time it is important to understand that "fragility" is a relative term and has meaning only with respect to state performance at specific points in comparison with a given state's peers. In brief, fragility is not just to be associated with a final end-point beyond which the country cannot worsen; properly understood, it is a convergence of structural changes and processes that arise under specific conditions that are evolving over time.

We also argue that fragility is a measure of the extent to which the actual practices and capacities of states differ from their idealised image. It is a matter of degree not kind. It is intended to be a general term, one within which related, though more specific terms, including "weakness", "failure" and "collapse", may be located. Fragility is a measure of the extent to which the actual institutions, functions and political processes of a state accord with the strong image of the sovereign state, that reified in both state theory and international law. By our definition, all states are to some extent "fragile"; this is, we believe, a closer representation of reality than an arbitrary line, however drawn, between "weak" and "strong" or "resilient" and "vulnerable". Obviously, some countries have sufficiently robust capabilities across all vital dimensions of statehood to preclude our applying the adjective "fragile" to them, even as some states are so challenged across various measures that few observers would argue they are anything but fragile. Fragile states are often those emerging from de facto or de jure political settlements in which capabilities are challenged and evolving.

When we examine the most fragile states in the world, we see that their fragility should be understood in continuous and relative terms along three different dimensions of statehood—that is, ALC. States are considered fragile to the extent that they prove wanting along any one of these dimensions when compared with other nations.

First, there is the development or economic capacity problem. Populations living in fragile states are further from achieving the UN's millennium development goals on poverty eradication than any others on the planet. Among all developing nations, although they comprise roughly one-sixth of the world's population, fragile states by various definitions account for a disproportionate number of the absolute poor, of children that do not receive a primary education, of children that die before their fifth birthday, of maternal deaths, of people living with HIV/AIDS, and of people lacking safe drinking water.

Second, there is the authority problem, namely, a state's inability to control both its inhabitants and its territory. Since the end of the Cold War, fragile states have overwhelmingly been the locus 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 neighbours, exceeding concerns regarding terrorism, civil war, and international conflict. A state that does not fulfil the most basic

obligations of authority is one whose leadership lacks the means and credibility to compel internal order or to deter and repel external aggression. In addition, that leadership does not, or cannot, provide sufficiently for the people to attract minimal domestic support. Fragility begins when the central state starts to deteriorate, leading to the fragmenting of society, with loyalties shifting from the state to traditional communities that seem to offer better protection.

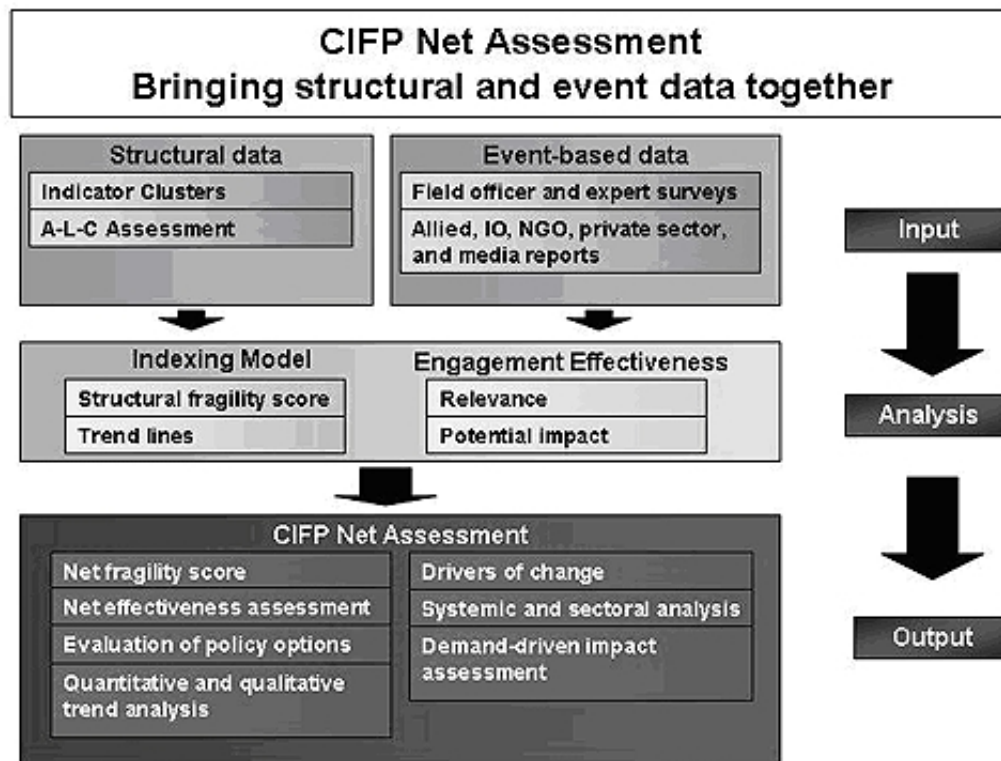
Finally, there is the legitimacy problem. When it comes to efficient governance, many fragile states lack the legitimacy to be effective and responsive policymakers. To be sure, while there are still some deeply entrenched and often predatory regimes among those states we call “fragile”, many simply reflect a disengaged population weary of governments incapable of providing basic services and of a legal system that makes contractual relationships, property rights and respect for human rights untenable. Fragile states need an institutional architecture for consolidated and sustainable political competition that ensures elites are answerable to the people they rule.

Our research has shown that the emergence of state deterioration is due to the failure of prevailing societal values to legitimise existing divisions of labour and political order. Perceptions and expectations are essential determinants of how a society views and reacts to state policy. In some cases, fragile states are in transitional stages in which existing ideologies fail to legitimise the positions of various actors in a hierarchical social structure. Under such conditions, the result can be the breakdown of the social and political order. In the context of state fragility, the destruction of national identities stands in the way of acquiring shared values that could provide a basis for inter-group co-operation and recognition of a common authority. The obstacles to contractual or hierarchical solutions to the problem of mutual non-co-operation are analogous: both the trust required for a contract and the legitimacy needed for a stable authoritative hierarchy will be elusive when state–society relations are weak.

To summarise, authority refers to the ability of the state to enact binding legislation over its population and to provide the latter with a stable and safe environment. Legitimacy refers to the ability of the state to command public loyalty to the governing regime and to generate domestic support for government legislation and policies. Capacity refers to the power of the state to mobilise public resources for productive uses.

We have collected and evaluated statistical measures of the aforementioned ALC components corresponding to six different categories of state performance: economics, governance, security and crime, human development, demographics, and the environment. The following diagram outlines the full extent of the CIFP analytical framework—known as the “CIFP Net Assessment” (CNA)—identifying the various modules involved in the analysis.

#### DIAGRAM 1 CIFP Net Assessment



The above project schema presents a methodology for evaluating individual country performance over time. This drill-down capability provides guidance to programming officers and other government departments working in complex and fragile environments. It enables them to focus efforts and resources on the root structural causes of fragility rather than on the outward symptoms of the problem, while simultaneously identifying areas of comparative strength within the state that may provide valuable points of entry for international development efforts. At the same time, it allows them to avoid decisions likely to destabilise the country further through otherwise unforeseen consequences of programming activities.

In addition to the use of structural data for the ALC components, indicator clusters and the overall fragility index, the systematic collection and evaluation of dynamic data—also known as events-based information analysis—is highly relevant to fragile states’ programming and processes. Dynamic data analysis, whether it draws on information from media sources or country experts, is useful for identifying up-to-date trends in popular perceptions, preferences and stakeholder behaviours. Dynamic data analysis can add considerable value through regularised and standardised reporting. It can deepen understanding of trends found in structural data, and can highlight trend reversals. For example, a statistical study may show a steady decline in violent occurrences over a series of years, but current events may evince a sudden surge in violent demonstrations, one that will show up in structural data only after the fact.

Events-based information can also provide a window into the perceptions of stakeholders, how they are reacting to real-time changes and why they are doing so. Such evidence, if properly understood, can allow policymakers to respond in a timely fashion to impending problems, rather than simply after the fact.

The project schema also employs qualitative information, as a valuable complement to the systematic collection of statistical data, as it uncovers details and nuance. Put simply, when correctly structured, expert opinion can provide the “why” behind the “what” revealed through structural and dynamic data analysis. Expert opinions can provide detailed insight into specific issue areas, as well as offer ideas about which areas deserve the most attention going forward, either because they are functioning well and can be used to propagate positive reform in other parts of the governance system, or because they are deteriorating and threaten to undermine stability and development in other sectors.

Overall, the CIFP approach has the distinct advantage of identifying country-specific patterns of fragility while at the same time allowing for broad, strategically relevant measures of effectiveness. Through our research on the most extreme cases of fragility, we have been able to analyse issues related to the timing and sequencing of policies, and speak about possible tradeoffs that policymakers need to confront in addressing the root causes of fragility and failure. Our work on small-island developing states has also been extremely helpful in understanding a particular subset of states that have succeeded in building resilience and overcoming inherent vulnerabilities. Taken together, our existing evidence-based and policy-relevant research and expertise can be used to design and implement governance and public-sector programmes in fragile and conflict-affected states.

## The Case for External Intervention

Fragility, as described in the previous section, is a process that might include large-scale conflict, disengaged leadership, failure to provide long-term service delivery or even the loss of legitimacy. Because of economic underdevelopment, a lack of political authority and poor legitimacy, fragile states function in a “grey zone” wherein donors are both uncertain and unclear on whether, how, where and for how long they should engage with such countries.

We set out to provide answers to these questions and published the results in a book called *Security, Development and the Fragile State*.<sup>2</sup> In it, we emphasise the multi-dimensional and multifaceted nature of the “fragile state problematique”. We highlight the need for continuous assessment and monitoring of countries at risk to allow intervention before they begin to fail, and discuss how to move them from fragility to sustainability and stability when they begin to recover. We also find a disconcerting upward trend in fragility over time, despite the increasing amount of resources being devoted to fragile states. In particular, there is a widening gap between the most fragile states and the most wealthy ones.

For these and several other reasons discussed below, we argue that external intervention is required and necessary, at least initially, in the most extreme cases of fragility, and ideally before countries collapse and fail.

First, the development challenges in the so-called fragile states are enormous. Many of them have remained fragile for decades, and even when progress is achieved small gains can be easily wiped out. One of the important findings from our research is the persistence of fragility over time; more

than half of the forty most fragile states in 1980 were still on that list in 2007. It is hard to imagine how development can take place without external intervention when states are weak or virtually absent, when their governments lack the legitimacy to govern and the authority to control their territories, and when they cannot provide their citizens with basic services such as health and education. In an ideal world, one would like to see the leadership and people in these states be responsible for their own development, but such a situation is unlikely in the short term when authority, legitimacy and capacity are all sorely lacking.

As a group, the forty-three fragile states identified by the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF), which is a subsidiary body of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, are home to close to one billion inhabitants, or roughly 15 per cent of the world's population.<sup>3</sup> INCAF uses a compilation of three lists to identify which states are fragile: the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, 2008; the Brookings Index of State Weakness in the Developing World of 2009; and CIPF's 2008 index. If current trends persist, none of these countries will meet any of the UN's millennium development goals by the target date of 2015, despite receiving plenty of resources in the past two decades.

Second, the humanitarian crises resulting from cases such as the three-decades-long conflict in Somalia, the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Darfur conflict in Sudan are stark reminders of the heavy price paid in terms of deaths, casualties, internally displaced people and refugees when states are allowed to fail or collapse. Research conducted by Collier et al. (2007) has shown that ignoring fragile states can be extremely costly as regards development, and also for neighbouring countries and the international community.<sup>4</sup> They estimate the annual cost of failing states to be more than twice the amount of aid being distributed globally, with most of the cost being inflicted on neighbouring countries. It is far more expensive to invest in rebuilding failed states than to monitor and take appropriate preventive action in fragile environments. A strategy of reacting to events is clearly not sustainable in the long run.

Third, since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on 11 September 2001, which were facilitated through the support given to al-Qaeda by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the world has realised that weak and failed states pose a threat not only to their own peoples but also to the security of other countries and of the international community as a whole. In our extremely interconnected world, we can no longer allow countries to descend into chaos without expecting some of that chaos to affect the rest of the world. As an example, consider again the case of Somalia, which is now being used as a safe haven by terrorists and pirates as a result of the absence of an effective central government since the early 1990s. Piracy imposes enormous costs on the global economy in the form of increases in insurance premiums for ships, trade diversion, costs related to deterrence, as well as costs to neighbouring countries in terms of reduced investment and tourism.

## The Challenges of Intervention

Having made a case in the previous section for external intervention, we now turn our attention to the more challenging issue of *how* to intervene. At the 2007 high-level meeting of the OECD's

Development Assistance Committee, development ministers and heads of agencies endorsed a policy commitment and set of “Principles for Good International Development in Fragile States and Situations” to reflect the growing consensus that fragile states need different policy responses because of their unique characteristics. In particular, these principles recommend that we take context as the starting point; do no harm; focus on state-building as the central objective; prioritise prevention; recognise the links between political, security and development objectives; promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies; align with local priorities in different ways in different contexts; agree on practical co-ordination mechanisms between international actors; act fast, but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance; and avoid pockets of exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, there are numerous challenges to state-building that arise in the modern context, including risks of ethnic conflict, obstacles to economic development, and regional instability. First, leaders must ensure they have institutions to provide adequate services to the population. Second, they must find ways properly to channel ethnic, social and ideological competition that will otherwise erode the effectiveness of weak institutions even more. Lastly, leaders must find a way to counter the cumulative effects of poverty, over-population, rural flight and rapid urbanisation, as well as environmental degradation, which can otherwise overwhelm a vulnerable state’s legitimacy. Rebuilding fragile states is a function of the policies leaders choose. Narrow policies favouring one group are less sound than broad distributive ones. In severe cases, the state must ensure that it has, on the one hand, the capacity to respond to crises produced by uneven ethnic mobilisation and social change, but on the other, does not become the dominating force providing differential advantages to regions and ethnic groups.

Although state-building is primarily a domestic process that involves local actors, the role of international actors is still very important. The donor community can assist and facilitate political and institutional processes in order to strengthen the basis for resilience through prevention, mediation and support of underlying structures. This might include political settlements, work to underpin the responsiveness of the state to fulfil effectively its principal functions in providing key services, and support for legitimate forms of societal political pressures that will determine how a state should function.

In the light of the above OECD principles, and our own research on fragile states, there are several challenges that policymakers need to address when intervening.

First, given our conceptualisation of fragility as being multi-dimensional, it follows that varying policy responses are required and need to be contextualised. In our own work, we have found that except for the most severe cases of fragility, countries are seldom extremely deficient in all of their ALC components. Such an observation underscores the variety of ways in which states exhibit fragility, and supports the utility of the ALC approach in highlighting different situations. We have also found it extremely helpful to profile countries along different clusters that include governance, economics, security and crime, human development, demography, and the environment (see section 2). It is not uncommon for countries with relatively similar fragility scores to behave quite differently along these various indicator clusters, thus further highlighting strengths, weaknesses, and entry points for policy actions. Furthermore, using quantitative indicators at the



structural level, in combination with dynamic analysis or events-based monitoring and qualitative assessments that are timely in order to provide a full picture of what is happening in-country, can provide further nuance and contextualisation for policy actions.

Second, although “doing no harm” makes sense in theory as a principle, in reality the practice is quite different. As an example, consider the 2010–11 elections held in the extremely fragile state of Haiti, where the underlying assumption (and source of confusion) is that democratic elections can buy legitimacy. All these elections did is further destabilise a country that has hardly recovered from the tragic January 2010 earthquake. In fact, barely a quarter of Haiti’s registered voters turned out for the elections, which are reported to have cost around US\$ 30 million, and prompted several accusations of fraud and vote-rigging. It would have made far more sense to strengthen state institutions, work with the then, admittedly weak, government to deliver basic services to the population, and gradually build legitimacy before holding elections later.

Third, and related to the second point, the timing and sequencing of policies is crucial. On the one hand, focusing on state-building as the main objective, as recommended by the OECD, makes sense, but only for those countries where legitimacy is weak. On the other hand, some states can be “strong” but lacking in capacity; after all, many democracies in Africa, Asia and Latin America have been overthrown and replaced by authoritarian regimes because of their failure to deliver economic development. Two findings from our work are crucial here. To the extent that the level of development is a highly significant determinant of fragility, growth should be prioritised, even if other factors such as regime type and trade openness matter. Furthermore, in the most severe cases of fragility, where sudden changes in authority structures are highly destabilising and independent of changes in capacity structures, specific instruments targeting individual weaknesses are required, rather than focusing on security and hoping development will follow.

However, in situations where fragility is not extreme, strategic timing and preventive diplomacy may be more appropriate for particular areas because of the positive effect they have on other weak areas. Our point is not to disagree with state-building as a concept but to argue that interventions need to be context-specific and timed properly and strategically.

Fourth, alignment with local priorities, co-ordination among international actors, acting fast but staying engaged for a long period of time, and avoiding pockets of exclusion, as recommended by the OECD, are all sensible in theory. In practice, these objectives are far from being met. Although donors should strive to work with governments as much as possible to help them build legitimacy and the capacity to deliver basic services, sometimes governments need to be bypassed, with aid being provided through different channels. Furthermore, aid dollars need to be systematically monitored by the deployment of impact assessment tools, and we must be prepared to withdraw or suspend aid when results are not satisfactory. The proliferation of donor agencies and the lack of co-ordination among them are still a pressing problem, leading to the duplication of efforts. In this respect, the use of multi-donor trust funds, for example, should be further encouraged.

As for avoiding exclusion, looking at aid allocation among fragile states, it is still the case that fragile states are under-aided as a group compared to other aid recipients. Within the group of the most fragile states, one can find both “aid darlings” and “aid orphans”, with some countries being

overfunded with respect to absorptive capacity. For example, the top five recipients of aid among the forty-three fragile states identified by INCAF received more than half of the aid allocated in 2008 despite representing only about 20 per cent of the population living in these fragile states. It is quite likely that some of these countries are receiving more aid than they can absorb effectively. In our view, too much emphasis is still placed on the quantity, rather than the quality, of aid delivered.

## Three Recommendations

Over the past few years, much has been written on failed and fragile states. Our argument in this article is that external intervention, based on a proper conceptual understanding of fragility, is necessary but not without challenges. This does not mean that domestic policy-choices, local leadership and the role of civil society are unimportant; clearly, local factors and initiatives matter. However, in many cases where these are missing, external intervention is necessary and should seek to achieve its goals in the long term. Our own work on the causes of fragility, the implications of state fragility for aid allocation and aid effectiveness, and the timing and sequencing of policies in fragile contexts, has yielded some important insights regarding the “why” and the “how” of intervention. The evidence suggests that we need to be forward looking, and move from the traditional reactive stance to a preventive one. It also suggests that we need to be more careful about the timing and sequencing of policies in fragile states.

We have three recommendations for policymakers working with fragile states.

First, support policy-relevant analysis. It has been argued, many times before, that a key problem in responding to fragility and failure is not the availability of information or the absence of early-warning information, but lack of a clear understanding of how to make diagnosis policy-relevant. In this regard, and as we have shown, risk analysis and early warning need to be practicable, standardised and accessible. In other words, the absence of a clear understanding of how specific information fits within the operational capacities of the end user is the most significant constraint on effective conflict prevention. Properly understood policy-relevant diagnosis combines real-time dynamic analysis with structural information, matches the analysis to the operational capacity of the end user, and provides an evaluative framework for assessing policy impact.

Second, make prevention pay. Political will, or more specifically its absence, is the number one justification for failing to respond to impending and foreseeable disaster. Making prevention pay means that the costs (and risks) of inaction must be fully calculated and clearly communicated. It also means that institutional incentive structures must be better developed to ensure better co-ordination across departments and between governments. Pooling of resources is one way to assist in the process of identifying costed options, but this must be achieved at both the micro and macro level. Co-ordination means that programme officers from different departments should work effectively together as a problem-solving team and not in isolation.

Third, integrate findings and methodologies across research communities. There is a lot of good, mostly complementary, analysis both in academe and advocacy circles on fragility and failure. Some analysis and research finds its way into the policy community, but not much of it is linked

together in a formal institutionalised way with ongoing and secure funding. When it is used, fragility analysis tends to be drawn on in an *ad hoc* and selective manner. As a result, key findings remain underutilised and researchers have little incentive to collaborate among themselves and with the policy community. More hazardous is a trend within government towards individually tailored in-house analytical tools, with each department advocating a distinct set of indicators, tool kits and assumptions about causal connections that support their agendas.

#### ENDNOTES

1. CIFP is an independent research organisation based at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, in Ottawa, Canada. It focuses on democracy and governance, aid monitoring, risk analysis and the mainstreaming of aid effectiveness. The project has over fifteen years' experience in developing methodologies, training and working with local, national and regional organisations and governments. Its reports and publications provide in-depth analyses of country performance. CIFP's funders and supporters have included the United Nations Development Programme, Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Defence Research and Development Canada, the Canadian International Development Agency, the SWPs Conflict Prevention Network, and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.
2. David Carment, Stewart Prest, and Yiagadeesen Samy, *Security, Development and the Fragile State: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Policy* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009).
3. Many of these countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa.
4. See Lisa Chauvet, Paul Collier, and Anke Hoeffler, "The Cost of Failing States and the Limits to Sovereignty", UNU-WIDER research paper no. 2007-30, Helsinki, Finland, May 2007 [[http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/research-papers/2007/en\\_GB/rp2007-30/\\_files/78091838031399332/default/rp2007-30.pdf](http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/research-papers/2007/en_GB/rp2007-30/_files/78091838031399332/default/rp2007-30.pdf)].
5. For a full description of these principles, see OECD, "Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations", Paris, April 2007 [<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf?contentId=38368715>].