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## **Aid effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**

Lessons from more than two decades of research

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**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is to focus on fragility research findings and examine what works or does not work in development aid and development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. We draw on our own research findings as well as country-level studies. We examine questions of aid effectiveness in the context of supporting good governance in fragile states in the first part of the paper. We then consider the impact of COVID-19 and implications for aid effectiveness in fragile states in the second part. In the third and final section we briefly consider how the war in Ukraine is impacting fragile states and the long-term prospects for aid effectiveness in an era of geopolitical rivalry and great power competition.

**Key words:** fragile states, fragility, COVID-19, aid effectiveness, Ukraine

**Note:** This paper builds on and extends earlier works, in particular Carment et al. (2020) and Carment and Belo (2021b).

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## 1 Introduction

The objective of this paper is to focus on fragility research findings to examine what works or does not work in development aid and development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. In our analysis, we draw on our own research findings as well as country-level studies. We examine questions of aid effectiveness in the context of states trapped in fragility in the first part of the paper. We then consider the impact of COVID-19 and implications for aid effectiveness in fragile states. We conclude by briefly examining how the war in Ukraine is impacting fragile states and the long-term prospects for aid effectiveness in an era of geopolitical rivalry and great power competition.

As the development challenges facing fragile states has become better understood, the World Bank Group's terminology has evolved over the years: from Low Income Countries Under Stress from 2006 to 2009, to the Fragile States List in 2010, to the Harmonized list of Fragile Situations from 2011 to 2015, and currently the List of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations. These changes reflect the need to move beyond low incomes and problems related to governance and weak institutions, to those of conflict and instability, and more importantly to recognize the various types of circumstances facing fragile states. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has been compiling lists of countries considered fragile since 2008, has increasingly recognized the multidimensional nature of fragility. In a recent States of Fragility 2020 report, the OECD (2020) identified 57 fragile contexts (including 13 extremely fragile contexts), while the World Bank Group lists 39 countries in fragile and conflict-affected situations in fiscal year 2023. The World Bank Group listed 37 countries as fragile in 2020 and thus a much smaller number than OECD (2020). Despite these differences, there is a consensus that a group of countries labelled as fragile, including a few that have been trapped in fragility for decades, have been continually vulnerable over time despite receiving significant amounts of development assistance.

## 2 Overview of trends and data

After a brief period of declining fragility at the turn of the century, fragile states have become more prominent as their precarious situation worsens in a COVID-19 world now beset by a war in Ukraine that is having serious impacts globally (Carment and Belo 2021a). In the last decade or so, we have seen an increase in armed conflicts and violence around the world. Recent data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program indicate an increase in organized violence of 46 per cent in 2021 due to conflicts in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Yemen (Davies et al. 2022) The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated fragile states' performance in several important ways by further weakening their capacity for response and prevention and by delinking their economies from global financial, trade, and aid flows. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than three-quarters of the world's extremely poor were already living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The global pandemic has also had the effect of causing millions of people living in fragile contexts to fall into extreme poverty. Although poverty has declined in a few fragile states, many are not on track to meet the global target of eradicating poverty and it is expected that poverty will become increasingly concentrated in these fragile states by 2030. Aid or official development assistance (ODA) is the second largest source of external finance for fragile countries (OECD 2020) after remittance flows (and often the first when examined country by country). Unlike other countries where investment flows are more predominant, fragile countries depend much more on external official financing and do not mobilize enough resources domestically to create a strong fiscal pact and build

legitimacy. So unlike other developing countries where poverty has declined significantly and the need for foreign aid has declined relative to other resource flows, fragile states continue to be characterized by the persistence of poverty and a high dependency on foreign aid.

The needs for both humanitarian<sup>1</sup> and development assistance are pressing and real in fragile contexts. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Afghanistan—a country trapped in fragility—where net ODA as a percentage of that country’s gross national income was more than 20 per cent in recent years (World Development Indicators, World Bank) before the return of the Taliban. With its foreign assets frozen and cuts in aid spending from major donors that are reluctant to recognize the legitimacy of the new regime, the country cannot even provide basic services to its population and is now in the middle of a severe economic and humanitarian crisis.

ODA to fragile countries has steadily increased in the past few years as both bilateral and multilateral agencies have reallocated aid away from stable to fragile countries. For example, Desai (2020) uses the list of fragile contexts from the States of Fragility 2020 report discussed earlier and reports that Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries gave more than US\$60 billion, or 63 per cent of their net country allocable ODA to fragile contexts in 2018. If we start from the premise that development is a homegrown process that cannot be dictated from outside, can foreign aid be effective in fragile states where, by definition, governance is lacking? Can aid buy reforms and improve governance in fragile contexts or could it even cause unintended harm?

Since the seminal contribution by Burnside and Dollar (2000) and those of other macro aid effectiveness studies which showed that the impact of aid on growth was conditional on the quality of policies and institutions, the effectiveness of aid in fragile states has been questioned. McGillivray (2006) and McGillivray and Feeny (2008) find that aid to fragile states was volatile, with both aid darlings and aid orphans. This speaks to both the volatility and unpredictability of aid flows, which have been shown to reduce aid effectiveness (Bulir and Hamann 2008). McGillivray and Feeny (2008) argue that aid works in the sense that it is associated with growth in fragile states, even if, as one would expect, the impact of aid on growth is higher in non-fragile countries. McGillivray and Feeny (2008) also find that fragile states face more difficulties in absorbing amounts of aid received when compared to non-fragile countries and that there are diminishing returns to aid. The issue of absorptive capacity seems to be less of an issue in post-conflict settings (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), suggesting that more aid can be allocated after the end of conflicts. However, such an approach will only work if there are good policies in place.

Another issue that has been examined with respect to aid effectiveness generally is that of donor proliferation and aid fragmentation, given the emergence in recent years of new actors—such as non-DAC donors, private philanthropic foundations, and global funds—in addition to traditional bilateral and multilateral donors. For example, Kimura et al. (2012) find that aid concentration (proliferation) has a positive (negative) impact on economic growth while Han and Koenig-Archibugi (2015) uncover a U-shaped relationship between health aid donors and child survival. While these studies do not consider fragile states specifically, there is no a priori reason to assume that donor proliferation and aid fragmentation would not be relevant in such contexts. There have also been ongoing debates in the literature about the choice of aid modalities (e.g., technical assistance, project vs. programme or budget support, multi-donor trust funds), whether bilateral

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<sup>1</sup> The rise in the frequency and severity of natural disasters due to climate change is already having a disproportionate impact in fragile states; a case in point is the recent floods in Pakistan. More frequent and severe natural disasters are partly responsible for the steady increase in humanitarian assistance per capita and as a percentage of total aid (Milante and Lilja 2022).

vs. multilateral aid should be prioritized, and how these choices impact aid effectiveness, with no clear consensus emerging.

Going back to macro aid effectiveness studies, while the Burnside and Dollar (2000) results have been found to be less robust than expected, the fact that progress in fragile states has been lacking when compared to the amounts of aid spent in them has raised serious doubts about the latter's effectiveness in fragile contexts. Beyond aid effectiveness studies, there has also been much focus on aid practices and good principles of aid delivery, whether through the 2005 Paris Declaration, the 2007 Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations, and the g7+ New Deal on Fragile States. On paper and in theory, these principles make sense for the most part; their applications, however, have been more difficult (see for example, Samy and Aksli (2015) about the Paris Principles and Hearn (2016) about the New Deal).

In regard to understanding the underlying cause of fragility, recent research has shown that it is difficult to find monocausal explanations for why states remain fragile and some remain stuck in a trap (Carment and Samy 2019a). Focusing on one factor such as economic development or political development is rarely sufficient; not all trapped states experience large-scale violence, and neither is conflict intensity constant within a given trapped state. For example, using their ALC framework, Carment and Samy (2019a) show that states trapped in fragility (see Table 1) face challenges related mostly to legitimacy and authority, as opposed to capacity. In their conceptualization, states need to exhibit three fundamental properties of authority, legitimacy, and capacity (ALC) to function properly (Carment et al. 2009). Thus in the last two decades or so, a separate and related literature has also evolved to examine the nature, causes, and consequences of state fragility (Carment et al. 2009).

In Country Indicators for Foreign Policy's latest ranking, Chad tops the list of fragile states. Sudan, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan make up the top five. Ranks five to ten are occupied, in order, by Yemen, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, West Bank and Gaza, and Eritrea. A year-over-year comparison with previous rankings from the project shows that Somalia, Chad, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Sudan, and South Sudan rank consistently among the top poor performers and usually almost always within the top five for several years. These are countries that we would typically characterize as being trapped in fragility (Carment and Samy 2019a).

The majority of the top 20 most fragile states are located in sub-Saharan Africa, a finding that is consistent with our historical data.<sup>2</sup> The rest are in the Middle East and North Africa, namely Syria, Yemen, and the West Bank and Gaza, and in Central and South Asia, namely Afghanistan and Pakistan. These regional distributions find concordance in our composite analysis of fragility using the ALC cluster scores. The ALC and regional distribution assessments enable policy makers to evaluate the different characteristics of stateness, namely in terms of identifying the sources and extent of both weaknesses and strengths; they also assist policy makers in their decisions on where and how to engage by providing additional nuance to the question of fragility.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://carleton.ca/cifp/>

Table 1: Fragility trap countries, 1980–2019

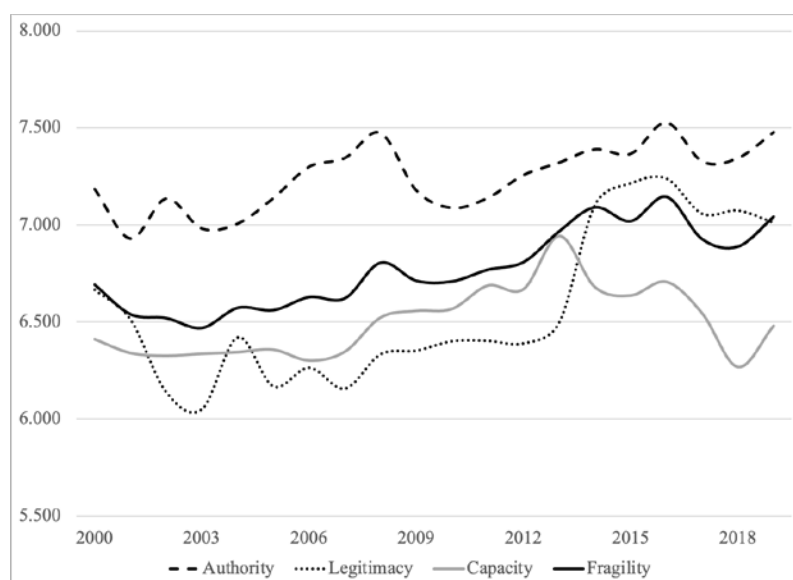
Country	Fragility score (2019)	Ranking (2019)
Afghanistan	7.01	7
Burundi	6.84	19
Chad	7.23	1
Dem. Rep. of Congo	7.15	8
Ethiopia	6.49	24
Pakistan	6.70	17
Somalia	7.55	3
South Sudan	7.59	5
Sudan	7.18	2
Uganda	6.46	13
Yemen	7.28	6

Note: Sudan and South Sudan were considered together for earlier years.

Source: authors' compilation from CIFP data.

When we examine the average performance (2000–19) of the fragility trapped countries, their performance on authority is worse, on average, followed by legitimacy and then capacity. In fact, despite an improvement in capacity and a slight improvement in legitimacy in recent years, average authority scores have deteriorated and contributed to a deterioration in fragility scores. Average legitimacy scores have also been consistently worse than capacity scores for the trapped states since 2014 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Fragility and ALC, trapped states, 2000–19



Source: authors' compilation from CIFP data.

### 3 Is legitimacy the key?

To determine how these trapped states have recently performed, we mapped 24 relevant indicators against the ALC framework to examine how these states are performing along these dimensions. We end up with 15 indicators that reflect authority structures (such as conflict and violence, government effectiveness, level of corruption, and rule of law) and nine that are related to legitimacy (such as service delivery, effective institutions, inclusive decision-making, freedom of the press, and human rights).

The best performing trapped country on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2021 is Ethiopia with a score of 39 over 100. All the others score less than 30 and are at the bottom of the rankings. Using the measure of rule of law<sup>3</sup> from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) of the World Bank, seven of the 11 trapped states saw a deterioration in their performance from 2015 to 2020. In the case of legitimacy (examined here through voice and accountability and regime type), the voice and accountability<sup>4</sup> measure from the WGI deteriorated in five of the 11 trapped states from 2015 to 2020, with a clear improvement in only three of the remaining six. The 2022 Freedom in the World report by Freedom House rates all of the trapped states as 'not free' except for Pakistan which is rated as 'partly free'. Overall, trapped states do not have full control over their borders, territories, and peoples, and they are characterized by ungoverned spaces. They cannot guarantee a secure environment for their citizens. Their governing regimes cannot command public loyalty, neither can they build domestic support for their legislative agendas.

What are the implications for aid effectiveness? In a valuable interpretation of the fragility trap, Pritchett et al. (2010) and Andrews et al. (2017) argue that fragile states adopt 'isomorphic mimicry' to maintain international legitimacy despite structural dysfunctionality. Isomorphic mimicry allows trapped states to exist while creating the illusion of implementing effective developmental policies. Similar studies have identified mechanisms through which trapped states artificially 'prop up' their institutions, so that the institution looks and feels like an ideal model; however, the actual functionality and resilience is left lacking (Pritchett et al. 2013). Closely related to 'isomorphic mimicry' is the idea of 'premature load bearing', wherein newly formed state institutions are expected to achieve much more than is possible in a short period of time (Pritchett et al. 2010).

Good governance is further weakened when development agencies rely on results-based management (RBM) approaches to decide where and how much aid to allocate. That is, recipient states adapt to the expectations placed on them. Bermeo (2016) shows that fragile state reversals and 'regressive' trends in governance are partly due to the fact that governance abuses by regimes have become subtler over time and are more difficult to monitor through an RBM approach. For example, outright military coups have become less common and those coups which do occur are framed in the context of an effort to restore or improve democracy. Coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Gambia, all of which were led by US trained officers, are considered to be efforts to restore stability and good governance to the country (The Intercept 2022). Such adaptive strategies allow elites to 'buy time' to enable reforms to work, to mask non-accomplishment, or actively resist or deflect internal and external pressures for improvement.

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<sup>3</sup> The rule of law measure estimates the perception of how much agents trust and respect rules of society such as quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, and those related to crime and violence.

<sup>4</sup> The voice and accountability measure estimates the perception of how much citizens can participate in selecting their government and freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.

Simply put, it is dangerous to conflate institutional form with institutional function (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2008). Further, implementing development policy that does not consider the specific incentive structures that help provide order can be ineffective or further exacerbate core structural problems. For example, Ethiopia's ongoing civil war, one of the bloodiest in recent history, is driven in part by America's security first agenda, which has favoured military aid over good governance (Carment et al. 2019).

In contrast to capability traps driven largely by donor expectations regarding institutional capacity and development, legitimacy traps conjure up ideas of limited societal consent and participation in systems of good governance and effective leadership. For example, states where the ruling regime lacks broad, voluntary domestic support suffer from a lack of legitimacy and poor institutional design. Indeed, elites may be incentivized to undermine institutional design for their own purposes (Carment and Samy 2019a). In such instances, political interference, rent seeking, elite capture, and lobbying are the key culprits in propagating extreme fragility (Asongu and Kodila-Tedika 2013)

In response to state repression, populations may disengage from formal institutions, with a commensurate decline in compliance with the law. In essence, societal compliance decreases when state institutions lose legitimacy in the eyes of large segments of the population. The idea of realizing legitimate political orders as expressed in SDG 16 can thus become more rhetorical window dressing than the means to economic development; governments routinely base their legitimacy on a variety of other grounds, invoking ideology, external threats, or even the divine right of kings to justify their exercise of authority. Without any meaningful enforcement mechanism or clear understanding of how such process-ordered measures of legitimacy lead to effective outcomes, improving governance can prove difficult.

Under these conditions, a core problem raised by North et al. (2007) in their discussion of Limited Access Orders is that external interventions are unable to solve the problems of fragile states because policy prescriptions advocate for the implementation of institutions and procedures mirroring those of developed Western countries. Chauvet and Collier's (2008) empirical study on the ineffectiveness of aid to induce reform among failed and fragile states draws a similar conclusion. The key point that these writers make is that political development can be reversed or become stagnant when elite interests deliberately undermine economic and political inclusivity. While it may be tempting to assume that reversal and decay among fragile states are primarily a function of the discarding or ineffectiveness of institutional structures inherited from colonial powers, the real reason is elite incapacity and an unwillingness to reform (Carment and Samy 2019a).

For example, in reflecting on Closed Access Orders, Fatton (1995) argues that elites develop specific structures to help perpetuate popular support for the status quo. Drawing a distinction between local, regional, and national elites, Fatton notes that where there was convergence of interests among these groups for change and reform, it was largely in support of a national project such as achieving independence. Over time, such cohesion becomes largely fragmented by economic interests and ethnic loyalties. Local and regional elites subsequently become disengaged from the national project and the institutions that support them. The consequence of this fragmentation is the formation of patron-client relations along parochial, often ethnic, lines and the development of personal rule in which personal authority and the power of the patrons determine system stability (Jackson and Rosberg 1982).

In fragility analysis, the term under-governed spaces has similar meaning (Carment and Samy 2019a). In spaces that are under-governed, we expect both diminished symbolic and material engagement of disadvantaged groups in national institutional structures, the economy, and the polity. The most obvious form of withdrawal would be the failure of a constitutional order to



properly protect the autonomy (territorially, economically, or politically) of minority groups, with the result that they are underserved and disengaged from the national political scene.

Under some conditions, coerced participation is as delegitimizing as de-participation. Both reflect an unhealthy relationship between state and society. Under-governed spaces are particularly problematic in trapped states because they obstruct the formation of national identities, intensify the salience of regional and ethnic differences, and reduce the prospects for a functioning economy. Most importantly, these spaces serve as a brake to induce change because they limit growth and enhance the power of those elites (both local and national) who benefit from their perpetuation.

The prevalence of hybrid regime design among fragile states reflects this relationship between governed and under-governed spaces. Hybrid states are those that have not transitioned towards fuller liberalization or consolidated democracy and are stuck in a low-level equilibrium (Carment et al. 2019a). Many of these states are not partway through a 'transition'. Ottaway (2003: 3) contends that hybrid regimes are deliberately designed to 'maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails'. Marshall and Cole (2014: 21) argue that hybrid regimes 'very often reflect inherent qualities of instability or ineffectiveness and are especially vulnerable to the onset of new political instability events such as outbreaks of armed conflict, unexpected changes in leadership, or adverse regime changes'. Such instability is caused by the absence of a 'principled' commitment to the rules of democracy by elites and the public. For instance, in examining public opinion data from various countries in Africa, Bratton (2007) found that while people are attached to the 'idea' of democracy, they have little knowledge of its specific institutional components.

Perhaps the simplest explanation of the relationship between legitimacy and elites is that governments that are seen as illegitimate are forced to expend greater resources towards means of repression and coercion, weakening themselves in the process. Conversely, when ruled by a legitimate government, citizens can be expected to be more likely to defer to its authority voluntarily, rather than needing to be forced to obey. As Levi et al. (2009) write, while it is possible for a government that lacks legitimacy to rule solely through coercion, this is ultimately less effective and more difficult, citing the costs involved in surveillance and punishment relative to legitimate rule.

Writing about horizontal inequalities, Stewart and Brown (2009) note that the exclusion of certain groups from political and economic benefits can harm the legitimacy of the state. At the same time, later efforts to reform these inequalities via direct action can be stymied by that same lack of legitimacy (Stewart and Brown 2009). Other authors focusing on states that rely on foreign aid, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have noted that these states depend more on international legitimacy than domestic sources, and are less likely to provide effective institutions and services as a result (e.g. Moss et al. 2006). A disproportionate dependence on international support may weaken elite legitimacy.

In the context of elite machinations and their relationship to development assistance, consider Mali's underperformance, which is concomitant with an increase in international development assistance. Mali has generally been an aid-dependent country, but aid has increased substantially in real terms since its attempts to transition to a hybrid form of democracy (Bergamaschi 2014). The effects of aid increases, driven in part by promises to reform economically and politically have been staggeringly negative. That is because Mali's elites benefit from aid by 'brokering' its distribution. In order to operate effectively, an internationally funded non-governmental organization (NGO) relies on the cooperation (or at least benign neglect) of local government

institutions. In Mali, aid distribution has resulted in political alliances between influential politicians-cum-aid brokers and key NGOs (Carment and Samy 2019a).

Far from representing the interests of the people by establishing and adhering to institutional performance measures under a democratic system, the goal of the politician within such a system is to establish a patronage network and push for additional zones around areas over which they have more control. In comparison to elites producing policy outcomes based on a public demand system, Mali's resource distribution system is derived from elite bargaining and strategizing about relative power gains. Groups are only co-opted into Mali's patronage system if they possess enough power to be useful, and their leaders will only get control of a local zone if they have enough power to control that area (Carment and Samy 2019a). The ongoing conflict in Mali's North thus represents the deleterious effects of elite bargaining. The clans that rebelled sought additional administrative zones to be designated by the government in areas where they were dominant. These zones would then ensure their access to rents.

More generally, Mali's rent economy offers a viable option to the thin veneer of democratic reform on display to the donor community. For example, partnering with a development NGO allows local politicians an opportunity to skim funds, either directly or indirectly, by influencing where the money is spent. Additionally, NGOs need to engage the population. In a country where the majority are illiterate, well-educated elites are hired. As representatives of a hybrid state, Mali's leaders are not accountable to the people but to those who pay the rent, in this case, external donors. It becomes self-evident why democratic institutions have little purpose under such an arrangement, other than providing the cloak of international legitimacy through which state and regional elites can ensure resource distribution for the people of Mali. Such a system has the potential to under-resource key sectors of society, which do not factor into the maintenance of this system (Carment and Samy 2019a).

Afghanistan provides a second sobering analysis. With a price tag of over US\$2 trillion for the USA alone, the intervention in Afghanistan turned out to be one of the costliest and most unsuccessful campaigns undertaken by Washington and its allies. In terms of achieving a safe exit from fragility, let alone the achievement of SDG 16 targets, Afghanistan stands out as the most prominent of failures not just for the United States but for its allies as well. Donor impact on bringing equality, peace, and stability to the peoples of Afghanistan was limited. Donor priorities often stood in the way of progress especially in regard to gender equality. Poorly planned and mismanaged projects led to widespread mistrust among Afghan civilians and many projects collapsed after foreign troops left an area. In 2018, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reported that stabilization efforts that had been central to military and foreign policy in Afghanistan had largely failed. Aid efforts were implicated in that report in that they appeared to be fuelling corruption more than development goals (Carment et al. 2019). Hundreds of millions of dollars went unaccounted for.

Afghanistan remains a country trapped in fragility and is likely to remain among the worst performers in the foreseeable future. With a significant focus on security and terrorism, aid distortions skewed Afghanistan's development such that the core ultimately did not have a legitimate governance over the periphery. There were numerous national programmes meant to encourage economic development and community-based governance in rural Afghanistan, but most were unsuccessful in bridging the urban-periphery gap. As a consequence, Afghanistan was at best a hybrid system with a weak central government unable to enforce rules across the entire territory. Its government was deeply corrupt.

Indeed, Afghanistan was performing at a better level in 2002 than it is today. Whereas some of its peers have gone on to exit the 'fragility trap' due in part to concerted international action,

Afghanistan was actually more fragile by the time foreign troops left. Afghanistan is a classic case of how aid distortions favouring military and security over legitimacy led to increasing state fragility, the establishment of a hybrid political system, and under-governed spaces. In essence, Afghanistan was the world's biggest laboratory for the aid community's whole-of-government approach to failed and fragile states. Touted by the OECD and aid agencies as the key to operational success in fixing failed states, the results were visibly and palpably thin even in the early stages of the intervention. There was an inadequate analysis of Afghanistan's political, cultural, and ethnic background, which resulted in promoting inter-ethnic rivalries rather than preventing them (Carment and Belo 2021b). America's primary security objective in Afghanistan did not change much under George Bush, Barack Obama, or Donald Trump. But while that strategy might have been good for the USA, it proved to be a fatal flaw for America's NATO allies, who became increasingly frustrated with policy incoherence. Each ally had a different understanding of the resources and capabilities necessary for Afghanistan's stability and development. The construction of the Dahla dam is a good example of poorly implanted aid policy. Of the US\$50 million assigned to the project, roughly US\$10 million was paid to Watan Risk Management, a private Afghan security firm with an alleged history of crime and corruption. The impact of aid activities was thereby reduced because of a lack of coordination and strategy (Carment et al. 2019).

More broadly, instead of securing peace through long-term development, local economic capacity, and improved human rights, the coalition largely focused on achieving short-term military objectives. According to the US Department of Defense, total military expenditures in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2019 reached US\$778 billion, while only US\$44 billion was spent on local infrastructure projects (Carment and Belo 2021b). This was in line with Washington's own preference of pursuing foreign policy goals with kinetic means, rather than diplomacy and genuine state-building efforts. With reduced investment in the country's independent economic capacity, Afghanistan was destined to become reliant on foreign aid. Moreover, the strategy of aid distribution across Afghanistan embraced by foreign donors guaranteed that the most peaceful provinces also remained the poorest and underdeveloped, while the majority of aid went to the most conflict-ridden provinces (Carment and Belo 2021b).

Even with such a focus on short-term security, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition did not provide the Kabul government with sufficient capacity to maintain a monopoly on force. The withdrawal of NATO forces left a weak national government in Kabul, which was swiftly defeated by a well-trained, equipped, and re-energized Taliban. Afghanistan submitted a Voluntary National Review in 2021, just before the Taliban takeover, and while it mentioned that various laws and regulations had been drafted or passed, progress remained limited because of ongoing conflict and the elite's resistance to reforms. Although the United Nations recently voted to continue its work in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime is only partially recognized by the international community, making it more difficult for aid agencies to engage.

Trapped states such as Afghanistan face internal legitimacy challenges. Due to 'isomorphic mimicry' and 'premature load bearing', attempts to reinforce authority structures in trapped states through aid interventions will fail when the legitimacy of the regime in power is not taken into account. More than the 'process' of institutional performance, legitimacy must also be about 'outputs' such as improved service delivery and human development, and the creation of more space for civil society. Basically, states that are trapped in fragility or fail to exit fragility permanently fail to provide public goods to most of their populations, even if capacity improves.

There are implications for how aid and interventions can be targeted. Due to the importance of legitimacy, participation in systems of governance at the local, regional, and national levels, and effective leadership must be considered. Indigenous forms of political and economic organizations must be allowed to flourish. The various aspects of output legitimacy, starting with service delivery,

must be examined. These include under-governed territories where group cohesion is low with respect to how minorities are treated and making sure that unfair and inequitable distribution of resources are addressed. Donors must be aware of the possibility that aid, even if well-intentioned, can distort incentives and contribute to increasing fragility. Even if the evidence is mixed, there are concerns that aid may itself reduce the legitimacy of states by creating a disincentive for them to build effective taxation systems, and thus a proper fiscal pact between people and governments.

#### 4 COVID-19

If trapped states perform poorly on authority and legitimacy measures as demonstrated above, capacity, especially in regard to poverty, is also problematic. Before the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, which was subsequently declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020, the situation faced by fragile states was already worrisome for a number of reasons. First, several recent studies and reports had indicated that the geography of poverty was changing in such a way that extreme poverty would become more concentrated in places characterized by fragility and conflict in the next few years (Foresight Africa 2019; Gertz and Kharas 2018). Second, evidence gathered in the last few years (see, for example, ODI 2018) has shown that very few fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) were on track to meet their SDGs such as hunger (SDG 2), universal access to sanitation (SDG 6), and secondary school completion (SDG 4). Finally, as noted above, conflict and violence, inequalities, refugees, and forced displacement—all of which are exacerbated by climate change and COVID 19 (and the Ukraine–Russia conflict)—have also been on the rise in fragile contexts in recent years.

As a result of the pandemic, most countries, whether fragile or not, were moving into a recession by 2020, and that trend was further worsened by the Ukraine–Russia war (Carment and Belo 2022). Early estimates on the impact of COVID-19 from the World Bank indicate that global absolute poverty will rise by 40 to 60 million, causing it to go back to 2017 levels, and more pessimistic scenarios by Sumner et al. (2020) indicate an increase in poverty of 420 to 580 million people under a 20 per cent contraction. According to data from the OECD’s States of Fragility platform, due to their relative isolation from the rest of the world, the number of cases and deaths in fragile contexts has remained relatively low when compared to other non-fragile developing contexts. For example, confirmed cases and confirmed deaths from COVID-19 in fragile contexts were respectively 8 per cent and 7 per cent of total cases and total deaths globally in 2020. However, many of these calculations masked deep-seated problems in accurately reporting cases and accurately measuring fatality rates due to COVID-19. Therefore, efforts to reduce the risk of exposure have not necessarily prevented countries from weakening even further.

Consider the case of Lebanon, which made headlines as a result of a massive explosion of ammonium nitrate on 4 August 2020 at the port of Beirut that killed nearly 200 people, causing billions in damages and leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless. Lebanon was not among the top 40 fragile countries in our ranking and was in fact in 53<sup>rd</sup> position. However, even before COVID-19, its situation had deteriorated as a result of a dysfunctional government and poor economy. The explosion contributed to the collapse of the government in August 2020 despite measures to contain COVID-19 that included protocols for social distancing, reduced mobility, and border controls, as well as restrictions such as curfews on refugees.<sup>5</sup> Low oil and gas demand worldwide due to COVID-19 has delayed offshore oil and gas exploration, and Lebanon’s economy continues to face high levels of debt and unemployment rates exacerbated by the

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<sup>5</sup> See CIFP (2020a).

pandemic. As a mostly service-oriented economy heavily dependent on tourism, COVID-19 has led to massive unemployment and a scarcity of foreign currency (which normally comes from tourism, foreign aid, and remittances). The country does not have a solid industrial base and depends heavily on imports for food and other basic necessities such as medicine and fuel which are paid from foreign exchange that has now become scarce. It did not help that Lebanon had been pegging its currency to the US dollar, which thus required ever increasing deposits of US dollars from private investors with the Central Bank to maintain its value. Maintaining the value of its currency by offering high interest rates to investors by the Central Bank has been likened to a Ponzi scheme that eventually fell apart.

Over the next several years, COVID-19's impact combined with the fallout from the Ukraine crisis will make it more likely that worst-case scenarios will be more easily realized for those countries emerging from sustained humanitarian emergencies. For states trapped in fragility as well as those in the middle tier beyond the top 20, long-term recovery depends on developing vaccines, containing the virus, and stopping re-infections after the first wave. Indirect impacts include lower demand for commodity exports and reduced mobility for aid programming in urban centres. COVID-19 can only intensify economic crises and increase food shortages, especially in cases where countries lack resiliency and coping mechanisms. Strained health systems resulting from a shortage of medicines as well as doctors and medical professionals will weaken response even further. For example, the Global Health Security Index score for South Sudan was 21.7 in 2019. This gives South Sudan an extremely low ranking of 180 out of 195 countries. Notably, South Sudan scored lowest within the category of having a sufficient and robust health system compared to the other categories that were analysed. Fifty-six per cent of people do not have access to primary health care services and over half of the health facilities in the country are not operational.<sup>6</sup>

Thus far we have observed wide variations in COVID-19 cases and deaths that exist even within the group of countries considered as fragile. For example, COVID-19 deaths per million were 36 in the case of Afghanistan and 28.4 in the case of Pakistan, compared to 0.08 in Burundi and 2.85 in neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sudan, Afghanistan, West Bank and Gaza, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Pakistan were all experiencing sizeable outbreaks of COVID-19 as of 27 August 2020. For this limited sample of the most fragile countries, there is a weak correlation between fragility, on the one hand, and cases or deaths per million, on the other. Many fragile states imposed restrictions and lockdowns and it would appear that the number of cases and deaths across countries reflect the unique circumstances that they each face. For example, the very high number of cases in the West Bank and Gaza is the result of the blockade that it has been facing since 2007 (Moss and Majadle 2020). For others, it is a combination of various factors, which include the degree of connectivity with the rest of the world, the extent of testing, and the accuracy of properly reporting cases and deaths.

The pandemic's most overt impacts are on the health of individuals who are infected and on the collective health of a nation's population. In the case of citizens of fragile states, structural vulnerabilities can significantly heighten the health impacts of COVID-19 and potentially increase the spread of the disease. In many fragile states, healthcare systems have a very limited capacity to provide adequate care for individuals who are infected. Many fragile states have few medical personnel per capita, weak or non-existent infrastructure, long-term chronic underfunding, limited numbers of hospital beds, and limited ventilators. These structural issues limit the ability of fragile states to deal with the spread of COVID-19 and increase the mortality rates for their citizens who are infected. In several trapped states, such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria, longstanding violent

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<sup>6</sup> See CIFP (2020b).

conflict has directly destroyed hospitals, caused medical personnel to flee the country, and generally further weakened healthcare capacity (often funded by, and dependent on, foreign aid) in these states. In many instances, FCAS also lack the capacity to implement containment and contact-tracing measures. For example, testing facilities and equipment generally are virtually non-existent in many FCAS. In 2020, an average of only 685 COVID-19 tests per million people had been conducted across all African states. In contrast, at that point in time, European countries had conducted just under 23,000 tests per million people. The most fragile state, Chad, was specifically noted as not having enough testing kits and was also experiencing staff shortages after many of those conducting tests fell ill. Instead of testing, aggressive and economically damaging shutdown policies are one of the only recourses for some states seeking to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Healthcare systems are also strained by ongoing healthcare challenges such as cholera, HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases. The limited resources available are often strained by these longstanding health issues, hence they have fewer resources to face the new challenge posed by COVID-19. In Yemen, the largest modern cholera epidemic ever recorded is impacting the population concurrently with COVID-19, and lack of functioning healthcare facilities has combined with people's fear of contracting the virus. This has led many to not seek treatment for cholera as the pandemic has unfolded. It is widely believed that cholera cases are now being vastly under-recorded and many individuals have been left untreated.

Another highly visible example of the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on other health challenges has been the disruption and suspension of vaccination campaigns. Disruptions have been caused by a number of factors, with one specific example being chronic staff shortages. The international personnel critical to many vaccination campaigns were forced to leave as shutdown policies and travel restrictions were implemented. For example, at least 30 measles vaccination campaigns had been cancelled or are at risk of being cancelled as of July 2020. The WHO and UNICEF warn that these suspensions could result in measles outbreaks in 2020 and beyond. One of the crucial reasons for these suspensions is staff shortages, with healthcare workers unavailable because of travel restrictions.

The UN's Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to the COVID-19 Crisis warns that: 'The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale' (United Nations 2020). Another direct example of COVID-19's economic impact is mass job losses. These job losses will continue to impact the citizens of FCAS, with the International Labour Organization estimating that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy—that is nearly half of the global workforce—stand in 'immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed' (Inman 2020)

Given the relatively larger importance of informal economic sectors in fragile states, these job losses are likely to be felt even more strongly. Additionally, women often make up a greater proportion of the workforce in certain informal sectors and are likely to be significantly impacted.

Other crucial economic impact areas include reduced economic activity damaging states' tax bases, remittance flows being severely curtailed by job losses abroad, potential reductions in foreign aid in the future, and worsening food insecurity. Food insecurity is of particular concern in the context of COVID-19 as containment policies are likely to be less effective among the chronically hungry and the consequences of imposing such policies far more severe. Those who are food insecure and live in countries affected by prolonged conflict are one of the populations experiencing the greatest degree of socio-economic marginalization during this crisis. In the face of the ongoing risk of food system breakdowns, the UN recommends taking all measures necessary, such as scaling up of food assistance programmes, to preserve food supply chains.

The social impacts of COVID-19 have been troubling and widespread. Domestic violence is widely reported to have risen significantly globally, and it is believed that this trend has increased as the fallout of the Ukraine crisis takes hold. For example, several harrowing reports of domestic violence have emerged from the Al-Bureij Refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Education systems globally have also been seriously disrupted by shutdowns, negatively impacting children and youth. In the most fragile education systems, the interruption of the school year is expected to have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable pupils. The most vulnerable students are impacted by conditions at home, such as lacking adequate internet, or a safe workspace, which negatively impacts their ability to continue learning remotely. In terms of the political impacts of COVID-19, the effect on FCAS varies. If governments handle the crisis poorly, and even more importantly if their policies are perceived poorly enough as a result of lack of trust in the governing regime, COVID-19 may further damage authority and legitimacy in the long run, increasing their fragility. In some instances, this may drive significant unrest and could potentially lead to permanent political change. In some instances, currently, shutdown policies and their subsequent economic impacts have led to minor sporadic protests in FCAS, including in Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

Whether longer-term political changes occur with COVID-19 as a primary cause is uncertain at this stage. Some militant groups such as Al-Shabaab have attempted to use the pandemic to their benefit. Al-Shabaab have based some propaganda around COVID-19, claiming that it was spread 'by the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them' (BBC News 2020). It is clear that armed groups may take advantage of the uncertain environment created by the pandemic and as the case of Lebanon discussed earlier shows, COVID-19 may itself cause civil unrest as socio-economic conditions in FCAS deteriorate further. In contrast, some limited and emergent evidence suggests that the pandemic may have contributed to a successful restart of stalled ceasefire negotiations in Afghanistan. However, in other areas of conflict, such as Syria, conflict has not slowed perceptibly at all, even during the early and intense stage of the pandemic. The concern, however, is that the longer the pandemic prevents a return to normalcy, the more difficult it will be to maintain the flow of humanitarian assistance and the momentum to continue efforts towards mediation and peace operations in conflict-affected regions. Whether COVID-19 will ultimately worsen current conflict situations or not remains uncertain at this point.

For the aid community, there are tough choices ahead looking to the next shock—health related or not. Beyond supporting measures to prevent the spread of the virus, donors will need to consider the expected impact their policies, projects, and programmes will have on local efforts to function despite the presence of the virus. A key question to ask is 'does the absence of a project contribute to increasing conflict and fragility risk?' In answering this question, donors need to think about how they plan to engage fragile states where the risks to aid workers are significant and vulnerable populations are even more so. Will donors work 'in, on, or around' COVID-19-like situations? By deciding to work 'in' a COVID-19 situation, projects and planning should take account of an environment in which a pandemic is likely or current, with procedures in place to ensure successful project implementation, and reduce exposure to risk for those people involved in its completion as well as beneficiaries and stakeholders. By deciding to work 'on' a pandemic, projects and funds should have very specific goals of reducing the spread and impact of the pandemic among the affected population, whether as a positive externality or an impact specifically tailored to meet the needs of the affected population. Working 'around' a pandemic means putting in place procedures to ensure that any negative impacts the pandemic might have on the success of donor projects are mitigated by avoiding those activities, populations and stakeholders directly affected. These choices are obviously not mutually exclusive, and their successful application will be determined in large part by the capacities, needs, and interests of the local populations.

## 5 The war in Ukraine

Sanctions on Russia are having a deleterious ripple effect on all parts of the post-Soviet region wherever diaspora-sending nations benefit from a robust Russian economy. It is well known that sanctions impact many ordinary people in post-Soviet republics that rely on Russia's economic wellbeing. With economic decline, Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, who depend on remittances from Russia, are experiencing a sharp deterioration in their gross domestic product. For example, some 3 million guest workers entered Russia in 2021 from these Central Asian republics. Remittances constitute some 30 per cent of the gross domestic product of Tajikistan, 28 per cent for the Kyrgyz Republic, and almost 12 per cent for Uzbekistan. The fall of the ruble against the dollar by 30 per cent had an immediate effect on the value of remittances being sent by workers to their home nations. Extreme reductions in these flows will have a catastrophic impact on Central Asia, generating additional political instability in an already fragile part of the world. Without gainful employment, Russia's guest workers will return to their homelands placing a further burden on their local economies (Carment and Belo 2021a).

The war has also inevitably raised the price of agricultural products and energy globally. For example, Russia is the world's third-largest wheat producer and is among the top three oil producers in the world. Ukraine is also a major producer of grains and cereals, and a major exporter of products such as sunflower oil, maize, and wheat. Comprehensive sanctions have disrupted Moscow's ability to export essential commodities such as wheat, oil, gas, and aluminium, as well. Prices of wheat and corn have risen to their highest levels in over a decade. Concurrently, the severing of energy deals between Western companies and Russian energy producers and the removal of major Russian institutions from the SWIFT payment system have raised the prospects of fuel shortages in both the short and long run. Other commodity exporters not directly affected by the conflict but eager to reap windfalls that will be generated by constrained supply are looking to renegotiate their contracts, withholding exports as a bargaining chip. Collectively, these decisions have placed an even greater constraint on the world's food and energy supply. Ultimately, developing and politically fragile states that are generally net food importers are among those most affected (Carment and Belo 2021a).

Since the end of the Cold War, the conventional wisdom driving foreign policies and the aid agenda was that strong economic relations and interdependence align strongly with peace. The West's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine so far shows that, as the cost of engagement in conventional military operations increases, the economic domain becomes increasingly important for the exercise of power and overall interaction between states. The preference for economic warfare challenges prevailing beliefs about why states go to war and how they fight wars. But as we see in the current crisis, economic actions, just short of formal war declarations, can have broad and debilitating global effects far beyond those that are directly involved (Carment and Belo 2021a).

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