Donors and the fragile states agenda

A fragile concept

The concept of fragile states seeks to marry development and security issues. But it has led to a variety of fragile state agendas of international donors, and a lack of consensus on priorities and strategies.

The phrase 'fragile states' has gradually become part of the vocabulary of international donors in recent years. The term has now partly replaced labels such as the World Bank's Low-Income Countries under Stress (LICUS) and combines a number of other categories, such as weak and failed states, post-conflict countries and countries where there is a relatively high risk of violent conflict breaking out or resuming. Fragile states are countries where there is overt or latent insecurity and/or bad governance, and low levels of social and economic development. It is a typical 'donor label' that is not always appreciated by the countries to which it is applied.

The term has been criticized for being too vague, as there is no consensus about how to define fragility, how to measure it, or what strategies can be pursued to reduce it. This lack of agreement creates problems not only between donor countries and international organizations, but also among ministries within the same country.

Agendas

Because there is no agreed definition of what is a 'fragile state', different organizations use various definitions, and produce their own lists of fragile states. This means that there are several international agendas to address the problem, which are not always compatible. There are also substantial differences between donors' objectives, their underlying assumptions about social change and the policy choices they make. A team from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the UK concluded that 'donor definitions appear to fall into three general but overlapping types: where fragility is defined in terms of the functionality of states, of their outputs (including insecurity) or of their relationship with donors'.

In the first case, when donors define fragility in terms of the functionality of a state, they emphasize the 'lack of capacity and/or will (the policies, governance and institutions) to perform a set of functions'. The focus is thus on the government's inability and/or unwillingness to guarantee internal security to its citizens and to provide basic public services, and the consequences this has for internal stability. The weakness of the state is implicitly seen as the main cause of crisis and lack of development. The term 'fragile state' itself emphasizes the importance of state-building as a way to create stable environments, an area in which the UN and donors have acquired considerable experience in recent decades.

In the second case, fragile states are defined in terms of their outputs, i.e. their negative and potentially destabilizing impacts at national, regional and international levels. The risks include disease, refugees, organized crime, and what is often seen as the greatest risk of all, terrorism. A clear illustration of this is US President George Bush's statement that 'America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones'. 'Fragility' therefore also relates to a state's capacity to fulfil its international responsibilities, and the resulting vulnerability of the West when it is unable to do so. Policy documents published by agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and DFID refer to the links between state-building and global security, sometimes also with explicit reference to 9/11.

The third definition centres on the relationships between states, and is used by donors who describe 'difficult partners' as fragile states. The need for aid is greatest in the least developed countries, where institutions are weak and governments are considered unreliable, but the channels for delivering it are limited. The increased attention to such countries then raises the question of how donors can most effectively intervene in such difficult environments.

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Clearly, new modes of intervention are needed that combine traditional development cooperation with other instruments.

The term fragile state is therefore not so much a label for a category of countries, but rather a way of addressing a group of 'problem countries' that are defined in different ways on the basis of three main ideas:

- unstable, underdeveloped countries are not only a problem for their citizens, but they also present a global security risk;
- strengthening weak states contributes to local stability and development, as well as international security; and
- international intervention in these areas is difficult but necessary.

Each of these elements merits a separate discussion, in which different policy choices have to be made. It is therefore not surprising that the term 'fragile state' covers different types of policy.

Security threats

The lack of security in unstable developing countries affects everyone, not only local governments and organizations, but also international organizations, governments and donors. This has led to the integration of security and development cooperation policy, in which the stabilization and strengthening of 'weak' states is seen as a win–win proposition. Yet we still know very little about the relationship between these two areas of policy, claims Patrick Stewart of the Centre for Global Development: 'Policy makers and experts have presumed a blanket connection between weak governance and transitional threats and have begun to implement policy responses accordingly'. Stewart does not deny that there are security threats to the West, but emphasizes 'the importance of knowing which states are associated with which specific dangers'.

Moreover, the opinions on how to deal with these dangers differ substantially. The concept of security may have been extended considerably in recent decades to include issues of internal and human security, but that has not always led to a consensus on policy. In Nepal, for example, India and the US see the main objective of the peace process as 'defeating the Maoists, whether by electoral or other means', while others give priority to consolidating peace and democratic reform in the country.

State weakness

Most policy analyses conclude that 'fragility' has multiple, complex causes, but they mainly emphasize the inadequate functioning of the state. Consequently, the remedies also tend to focus on strengthening government institutions. The tendency for international organizations and donors is to devote their attention to building up institutions like the army, the police force and the rule of law, but whether that can be achieved by external agencies is a big question.

According to some researchers, supporting state-building is extremely problematic. They see state-building as a long, often violent process that is never completed. A developing state has to overcome traditional power structures, to establish a monopoly on the use of violence and to develop the capacity to collect taxes and invest the revenues effectively. This process took a very long time in Europe, and today's young states do not have as long to mature. As noted by Mohammed Ayoob of Michigan State University, 'The fact that several sequential phases involved in the state-making process have had to be collapsed or telescoped together into one mammoth state-building enterprise goes a long way towards explaining the problems of authority and governance faced by the Third World states today'.

Critics of external assistance emphasize that state-building is essentially a highly political process. It may be possible to influence it from the outside, but international >

intervention always creates new dependencies and distorts the relationship between the state and society. In their view, international state-building often weakens the state. Other researchers are more optimistic, and believe that state-building is possible even in the most difficult situations. Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart of the Washington-based Institute for State Effectiveness, for example, claim that looking closely at examples of successful state-building can teach us important lessons about what works. In some cases, 'practice outstripped theory; and the world is rich in examples of countries that have transitioned from poverty and instability to prosperity and security'.

Most international organizations and donors fall somewhere between the extremes of 'forget it' and 'yes, we can'. An important discussion is ongoing in the academic community about how state formation relates to democratization, and about how fast and in what order political reforms should be introduced. Although democratization is always an important part of the reform agenda in postwar countries, many researchers believe that this actually increases the risk of conflict, and that a number of conditions have to be met before these countries can move forward with political and economic liberalization. In other words, introducing democracy too early can be counterproductive. One of these is Roland Paris of the University of Ottawa, who has argued for 'institutionalization before liberalization' (IBL), and for reforms to be introduced in sequence: first establish a strong state, and then proceed with democratization.

Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC, questions this. Although he acknowledges that the timing of elections after a civil war is important, and that democratization is more successful when certain preconditions are fulfilled (economic development, the rule of law and so on), he believes that democratization can also be achieved through a gradual process that 'involves reaching for the core element now [i.e. elections], but doing so in iterative and cumulative ways rather than all at once'.

There is clearly no consensus on what is the ideal path to follow.

Challenges

Another question is what external agencies can and should expect to achieve in fragile states where they face formidable challenges and frequent dilemmas. Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk are leading a study of postwar state-building for the International Peace Academy in New York. They claim that contradictions are inherent in postwar state-building processes, leading them to conclude that it is futile 'to purport solutions to the difficult dilemmas that face the practitioners of state-building'. In their view, intervention in these states is necessary and valuable, but is by definition problematic. Ghani and Lockhart, in contrast, see many opportunities, but note that 'the international aid system devised in 1945 is structurally and practically outdated'. The efforts to improve donor coordination and harmonization are having very little effect. Therefore, they say, 'the aid system has had the perverse effect of fragmenting states' ability to perform key functions'.

Other authors highlight in particular the negative consequences of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, which were based on the assumption of the 'overdeveloped state' and called for downsizing. The SAPs are considered to have been partly responsible for the further erosion and weakening of the state.

Aid is not enough

Policy makers appear to be listening to these discussions. A new debate is now underway about the 'modalities' of aid in fragile states, and possible new instruments that could be employed. There are also increasing calls for greater policy coherence in relation to fragile states. The fragile states agenda covers a wide range of activities in fields such as state-building, stabilization, international security and humanitarian aid, including support for security sector reform, demobilization programmes, economic reforms and emergency aid. These activities are developed not only by traditional aid agencies; governments themselves increasingly pursue a comprehensive policy with respect to failing states, employing a range of instruments. This is called the 3-D (defence, diplomacy and development), integrated or the 'whole of government' approach. In 2005, DFID published a policy paper that looked at how best to work in fragile states and what kind of aid is possible. DFID concluded that aid is not enough, and that other instruments, including diplomacy and defence, are also required.

Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown of the Centre for Global Development recently assessed the 'whole of government' approaches of six Western countries. The differences between the approaches of the UK and the US in particular show how these approaches can have very different outcomes. The UK is seen as a pioneer in the development of policy on fragile states. Even before 9/11, the British involvement in Sierra Leone focused attention on ways of contributing to stabilization and reconstruction, and on the relationship between development and conflict. From 2000 on, efforts were made to coordinate the activities of

Which states are fragile?

In compiling lists of fragile states, donors employ different criteria and refer to various sub-groups of fragile states. One important distinction continues to be made between countries in the 'conflict phase', postwar countries (such as Liberia and Nepal) and countries where there has been no civil war or where violence has occurred on a limited scale. In states that fall into this last category, prevention can be important. The World Bank's LICUS programme, for example, classifies countries as post-conflict, conflict affected and non-conflict affected. Another common distinction is based on the capacity and willingness of governments, on which countries can score high or low, thus creating four categories of fragile states.

Despite the differences in definitions, there is consensus that countries such as Burundi, Nepal, Haiti and Kosovo can be defined as fragile. For countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia some use the label 'failed states' or 'crisis states', whereas the term 'fragile' is reserved for states that run a risk of crisis. The Crisis States research programme at the London School of Economics uses these three categories.

Hollandse Hoogte/Andrew McConnell

A signpost declares a 'Gun Free Zone' on the road to Burao, Somaliland. For the past 16 years Somaliland has operated as a de facto state with relative stability.

different ministries, leading to the creation in 2001 of an inter-ministerial agency called the Africa Conflict Prevention Pool (ACPP). In 2004, the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (PMSU) published a report that emphasized the importance of an effective state for tackling problems of poverty, insecurity and bad governance, and the need to use a variety of instruments. In practice, however, cooperation between the different UK ministries proved difficult, due to bureaucratic competition and conflicting objectives. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for example, do not share DFID's vision of fragile states. For example, MoD has called on DFID to label Saudi Arabia as a fragile state and to set up aid programmes there, a proposal which DFID rejected.

In most countries, the fragile states agenda – and, in a broader sense, the link between development and security – is a source of tension among ministries. Not infrequently, these tensions are made worse by questions relating to 'who pays for what', and whose agenda dominates. Whereas the relatively strong position of DFID within the British government tilts the balance in the UK in favour of poverty reduction and security in fragile states, foreign policy in the US is 'almost entirely motivated by national security concerns'. The US puts a greater emphasis on military intervention, and the development agency USAID is now answerable to the State Department. The concept of state fragility and USAID's ideas about it, as described in its 'Fragile States Strategy', published in 2005, have therefore had little impact on foreign policy.

If the concept of a 'fragile state' is defined and used in different ways, the question then arises as to whether it is of any value. The term is 'highly problematic', says Susan Woodward of New York University. She has added up the pros and cons, and the latter considerably outnumber the former. In her view, the disadvantages include the vagueness of the concept, the many different ways it is interpreted by donors, and its connotation with counter-insurgency in some circles. Other authors are also critical about the concept and have argued that the term fragile states is an unhelpful aggregation of different situations which are likely to require very different strategies of response. On the other hand Woodward says that the advantage of the term 'fragile state' is that 'the focus in general is correct'. In that regard, the term can be used as a generic concept which enables policy makers to understand and analyze in a general way the relationship between instability, institutions (including the state) and development, and which helps them in formulating coherent policies.

But the concept is open to many interpretations and it is therefore unavoidable that the discussion about effective strategies in particular countries will continue. It is of course up to academics to study the way in which the concept is defined by policy makers, but the emphasis should be elsewhere. It is more important to continue to follow the various fragile state agendas with a critical eye and assess them on their merits from the perspectives of various academic traditions. ■

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