

# Fragile development

*The SDGs can only be achieved if the international community can improve its ability to assess fragile development situations – a classification that includes the majority of the world's most deprived and transcends national boundaries*

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**W**ith some 700 million people currently living on less than \$1.90 a day, the first and most ambitious of the global goals is to eradicate extreme poverty. To achieve this, more than 150,000 people will have to move out of poverty every day for 15 years. This is already a herculean task, but eradication will be particularly difficult because it requires transforming



the hardest-to-reach places – places where development is both fragile and complex.

In 2015, as the world geared up to adopting the new framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-30, we saw a round of reviews on peacebuilding, peacekeeping and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (on women, peace and security), looking forward to the next generation of development. The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding has also been reviewing progress on the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States – the agreement that came out of Busan in 2011 between donors, the international community and the recipient countries (represented by the g7+), as well as civil society.

This is a good time to reflect on development in fragile situations. If we, the fragile development community, are cleaning house for the next generation of development, we need to carry forward the lessons of what has worked and leave behind whatever has not.

### 'Fragility' vs 'fragile states'

Like 'weak states' and 'failed states', the term 'fragile state' may have outlived its usefulness. It was intended to juxtapose countries with special needs and challenges against the 'normal' others, but normality is itself being called into question. Many in the development community have critiqued the term 'fragile state' for its imprecision and lack of conceptual clarity.<sup>1</sup>

It is naïve and misleading to suggest that fragility is only – or even commonly – a challenge of the state, as doing so presupposes that both the problem and the solution will be found at the state level. Additionally, fragility has often been misdiagnosed by well-intended but misguided lists of fragile states, which use discrete thresholds to classify countries.

For example, the challenges of reconciling multi-ethnic interests under one-party, authoritarian rule in Eritrea – which is on

the World Bank's list of fragile states – are similar to those of Kyrgyzstan – which is not on the list. But these obstacles differ to those faced by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, where capacity-building to deliver services in remote, conflict-affected provinces presents a major challenge. Certainly, one can change the methodology, but it is only a snapshot of slow-moving indicators, rather than a meaningful diagnosis of the fragility.

For this reason, donors are increasingly acknowledging that the challenges of fragility are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted.

They are recognising that fragility is not a state-level challenge, and that it cannot be meaningfully arranged on a one-dimensional spectrum implied by an on/off list. In other words, they are realising that the concept of a 'fragile state' is devoid of meaning.

The term 'fragile', on the other hand, is extremely useful, something we should use moving forward in the next generation of development. Fragility – the vulnerability of a society or system to shocks, stresses and risks – is a useful moniker for development practitioners, both national and international, to communicate with each other. The term 'fragile development' (or, if preferred, 'complex development') moves the planning conversation into a more consultative, adaptive, flexible space, where planners are aware of risks and mitigate accordingly.

If we absolutely must speak of groups of people grappling with fragility, then the terms 'fragile system' or 'fragile society' may be more useful than 'fragile state'. Thinking at the system or society level may help us better understand the stakeholders, the common and divergent objectives and outcomes and the sources of friction in a group. Fragile systems can transcend state-level conversations.

It is more meaningful to talk about the fragile society that produced and sustains Boko Haram as opposed to the fragile state of Nigeria. Similarly, it is more useful to speak in terms of the fragile system of local trade as impacted by Ebola in the Mano River Basin rather than the fragile states of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – or the fragility of the Red Corridor rather than the fragile state of India.

There is, of course, value in classifying countries when we want to provide descriptive statistics, but because of the diversity in fragile situations, there is almost no information gained from clustering fragile states. Rather they could be more usefully clustered in terms of 'progress towards the SDGs'; by numbers of refugees and displaced persons or by net migration (people flee fragile situations); or even by a metric that involves air traffic or access for travel and tourism (most people, including investors, don't visit fragile environments).

This is not just semantics. Words matter in the diplomacy of development. Successful practitioners understand how to navigate the language around building a shared understanding of fragility. That shared understanding is developed through consultation with stakeholders who will not buy into solutions unless they share the language.

### Fragility assessments to build shared understanding

Over the next 15 years, poverty and lagging development will increasingly be concentrated in fragile settings. To work effectively on development and poverty eradication where it matters most, practitioners will have to hone their fragile and complex development skills. An essential tool for working better in complex environments is a fragility assessment.

Fragility assessments, including political economy analysis, involve multiple actors developing a shared understanding of a complex social system. Done right, they can be an engaging consultation process that yields powerful shared insights into both the nature of the problems faced and the possible solutions.

If fragility assessments are done poorly, they will be lost as a tool for the next generation of development. Consider a recent interview with Hafeez Wani from the South Sudan NGO Forum who notes that: "The New Deal was unable to accurately diagnose the true drivers of conflict and fragility due to the weaknesses in the tools and methodology applied. It focused more on the technical processes

<sup>1</sup> Residents of Damask, Nigeria with soldiers from Niger and Chad, who recently liberated the town from Boko Haram militants. Fragile social systems can undermine what are otherwise seen to be functioning states

such as the fragility assessment than meaningful and honest dialogue at the grassroots level and among wielders of conflict”.<sup>2</sup> Once the fragility assessment is seen as a technical process completely disconnected from the drivers of conflict and fragility, the grassroots and those who wield conflict – all of which are precisely the point of an honest fragility assessment – then it cannot be a useful tool. Who is consulted and how the consultation feeds into national planning clearly affects success.

Where fragility assessments have succeeded in building a shared understanding of the challenges and the solution space they have usefully fed into national planning. In Sierra Leone, for example, the ministry of finance championed the fragility assessment, with support from donors and additional capacity. Most importantly, the entire consultative process was endorsed by the president through a mutual accountability framework with donors.

Likewise, the assessment in Timor-Leste identified challenges and recommendations that have been fed through the ministry of finance directly into presidential planning. To continue to be impactful and successful, these fragility assessments will need to be revisited, with regular, widening consultations identifying emergent challenges, what is working and what needs to be adopted.

Fragility assessments are needed to build shared understanding of the challenges necessary for fragile development to succeed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development principles for good engagement note “first, do no harm” and avoid unintended consequences, and advise taking “context as the starting point” for all development. Indexes of fragility provide little of the context and, for many of the same reasons that lists of fragile states are not useful, they may actually do more harm than good.

It is unrealistic to expect that such diverse situations could be measured with one, ten or a hundred indicators (were the data even available) that could be usefully aggregated and provide a meaningful way to compare them to other fragile situations. The main reason is that because fragility is

a construct, it is not directly observable, so we cannot measure it. We can only measure symptoms and conditions that we think are related to conditions that we think are fragile. We cannot say with any certainty that our indicators can tell us that one society is more fragile than another, because we have never directly observed a spectrum of fragility.

soundly reasoned and well targeted, donors find them much easier to support. We could apply what we’ve learned about what works and what does not with compacts designed for development, aligned with the SDGs for 2030 visions.

Compacts for 2030 could serve to rally development actors, private finance,

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### *Planning need not be perfect, and rarely is. The vision may need to adapt ... but if the mechanisms for adaptation are built in, then the compact, coalition and consensus necessary to make progress can be sustained*

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#### **The value of compacts and strategic planning**

One of the great contributions of the International Dialogue has been the concept of ‘One Vision, One Plan’ and the vital importance of cooperation toward a single development plan. It is essential that the concept of compacts is carried forward into the next generation of development. If we are going to genuinely do things differently in the next 15 years, every society should have a vision or plan for development and every donor, civil society and non-governmental organisation should be able to explain how they are supporting that vision. If an actor cannot explain how his or her activities support the national plan, they shouldn’t be working on complex development. It is really that simple.

That being said, it may be time in the next generation of development to revisit the scope of compacts. Need they be limited to only peacebuilding and statebuilding goals? Certainly, if compacts are a good idea, then they would be useful for other areas of development planning as well. Development plans – from the Marshall Plan to the five-year plans of China, Russia and Ethiopia, to Vision 2020 of Rwanda, for example – have provided important focus for development efforts.

Where they are undertaken with broad consultation, they can build consensus and effective coalitions. Where they are

diasporas and other possible support in fragile development settings. It is well known that post-conflict/disaster needs assessments serve as a useful focus for development, humanitarian and security actors, but there is no reason to wait for conflict or disaster to occur just to enjoy the benefits of coordinated and collaborative action behind a single plan. Compacts for 2015 to 2030 would be more realistic, given the time frame necessary for development, and could result in the commitment of financing and staffing for longer periods. Compacts that extend to building a vision to meet the SDGs by 2030, including Goal 16 on peace, justice and institutions, would also be more palatable to domestic planners and policymakers, who must build national support for such a plan.

As the community moves forward with designing compacts for the next generation of fragile development, it will be important to build in the flexibility and adaptation that is vital for success. There is very little equilibrium in dynamic, fragile situations. Sunset and sunrise clauses, contingencies and scenario-planning should be commonplace in these compacts, in light of the complexity and the incomplete information we have on complex environments.

Planning need not be perfect, and rarely is. The vision may need to adapt to changing circumstances, but if the mechanisms for adaptation are built into the agreement,



## g7+: a different perspective on development

*"The g7+ knows from bitter experience that without peace and stability there can be no development, and that conflict is development in reverse."*

*H.E. Ms. Sofia Borges, Ambassador of Timor-Leste for the United Nations*

The g7+ was formed in response to a gap identified by conflict-affected states in the achievement of Millennium Development Goals.

Although the 20 countries that are currently members of the g7+ are geographically and culturally diverse, they share common attributes, experiences and impediments to development. They are among the world's most mineral rich, yet least developed and low-income economies, and all have struggled to recover from conflicts, in which they were often casualties of wider geopolitical contests.

Generous assistance from development partners has so far proved ineffective in breaking cycles of poverty and conflict. The group aims to learn from one another's experiences and to advocate collectively for contextually tailored development, in order to lift themselves to the next stage of development.

	Life expectancy at birth (years)*	GNI per capita PPP (\$)***	Net ODA (US\$ millions)*
Afghanistan	60	2,000	5,266
Burundi	56	770	546
Central African Republic	50	600	189
Chad	51	2,070	399
Comoros	63	1,430	82
Congo, Dem. Rep.	58	650	2,572
Côte d'Ivoire	51	3,130	1,262
Guinea	58	1,130	500
Guinea-Bissau	55	1,380	104
Haiti	62	1,730	1,171
Liberia	61	700	534
Papua New Guinea	62	2,790	656
São Tomé and Príncipe	66	3,140	52
Sierra Leone	50	1,770	444
Solomon Islands	68	2,020	288
Somalia	55	unavailable	992
South Sudan	55	1,800	1,447
Timor-Leste	68	5,080	258
Togo	59	1,290	221
Yemen, Rep.	64	unavailable	1,004

\* Data from 2013

Source: World Bank

\*\* Data from 2014

GNI = Gross national income

PPP = Purchasing power parity

ODA = Official development assistance

then the compact, coalition and consensus necessary to make progress can be sustained.

### International Dialogue: from club to community

The complex development community has dramatically pushed the fragility agenda forward in the last 10 years, moving past the 'post-conflict' lens to a richer understanding of how fragility, in all of its manifestations, affects development. Through the International Dialogue, much of what we know was enshrined in the New Deal principles, including the tools of fragility assessment and compacts.

The community has moved past advocacy, as awareness of fragility has spread across countries and institutions and even into the SDGs, through Goal 16. Collectively, the community has moved the language away from failed and weak states to fragility, complexity and resilience – terms that provide traction for more honest conversations about peacebuilding and statebuilding. Now that the advocacy on, and awareness of, fragility have been built, the International Dialogue will need to determine whether it is a club or a community. In many ways, today, it is a club – a closed door meeting between donors and recipient countries, with some civil society. Given the depth of the fragile development challenge ahead, it may be time to broaden the constituency of the International Dialogue, expanding it to include the emerging donors, middle-income countries grappling with similar fragile challenges, the private sector and other 'friends of fragility' that can help to meet these challenges.

This could be the right time to expand the membership of the International Dialogue to include new partners. With the common language we have developed around fragility, useful tools like fragility assessments and compacts, and a growing community of practice for fragile development, we may be able to meet the goals we've set for 2030. ●

- 1 See the 'SIPRI Yearbook 2015' for a review of the literature.
- 2 See 'Strengthening the Political Dimensions of Sustainable Development', Frient Biennial Peace and Development Report 2013-2014.