



# State Fragility

Suda Perera

February 2015

DLP Concept Brief 03

A state that is unable to fulfil its social contract by providing protection and basic services for its citizens can be regarded as 'fragile'. Such states are vulnerable to conflicts, humanitarian crises and environmental shocks. One of the key goals of the development agenda, therefore, is to reduce state fragility and increase state stability or resilience. Reducing endemic fragility has been framed as vital not only for the security of the 'fragile' state in question but also for global stability. As development has become increasingly securitized, the focus on so-called 'fragile states' has come to dominate the international agenda. However, a focus on state fragility can divert attention from non-state governance mechanisms, and labelling a state as 'fragile' may have unintended consequences that affect its development.

This brief introduces the concept of state fragility, a term that has been widely used but only fuzzily defined. It addresses three main questions: What is state fragility? How is the concept used in international development? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the term?

## Defining state fragility

A useful starting point is the OECD's description (2010: 21) of a fragile state as one that 'has weak capacity to carry out basic functions of governing a population and its territory, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society. As a consequence, trust and mutual obligations between the state and its citizens have become weak.'

Often the label of 'fragile state' is used interchangeably with terms such as 'weak state', 'failed state' and 'collapsed state', with little attention paid to the subtle differences implied by each term. See the box below for some of the characteristics frequently mentioned in definitions of fragile states.

Increasingly, state fragility is contrasted with the idea of state resilience. Countries such as Tanzania and Zambia, for example, may have high levels of poverty but they are also able to maintain levels of peace and stability. They should therefore be credited with attaining some degree of resilience.

*"Some research suggests ... it is more useful to focus on the limits of statehood, and understand state power as part of a wider network of governance mechanisms."*

In contrast, other very poor countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan have not managed to maintain peace. However, it is important to note that fragility and resilience 'are neither fixed nor immutable, but rather should be seen as shifting points along a spectrum'.<sup>1</sup>

The characteristics of fragility (see box) closely identify fragile states with vulnerability to conflict, and indeed several studies consider fragile and conflict-affected states in conjunction with one another. Mallett, Harvey and Slater (2014: 12) note that fragility 'produces heightened levels of conflict, mistrust and/or intolerance between a number of social and political actors'.

### Characteristics of fragile states

While definitions of fragile states differ, several typologies note the following overarching characteristics.

- Failure of the state to exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Putzel, 2010)
- Failure of the state to provide basic services for its citizens
- A crisis of legitimacy for the state<sup>2</sup>
- Failure of the state to develop its bureaucratic capacity (particularly to achieve a monopoly on legitimate taxation)
- Failure of the state to ensure that its institutions and rules take precedence over non-state institutions and rules
- A significant deficit in territorial control.

## How is the concept of state fragility used?

The close link between state fragility and conflict has resulted in the concept being widely used to align development objectives with donor interests. States without the capacity or legitimacy to manage their own affairs have increasingly been framed as potential sanctuaries for global terrorism and transnational crime. Increasing the capacity of fragile states has been seen as an activity that safeguards Western 'non-fragile' states from the negative effects of state fragility as much as it protects the citizens of fragile states. Consequently, there is a tendency when donors talk of fragile or failed states to impose 'a bias towards Western liberal statehood and market economy' and as such, 'the discourse on failed, failing and fragile states centres on state-building as the main remedy for establishing or restoring political and social order' (Risse, 2011: 1-3). Many OECD states prioritize funding for so-called 'fragile states', which may reflect the causal link between the emergence of the fragile states discourse and the securitization of development.

While the concept of state fragility has been used by donors to justify particular patterns of development spending and programming, some actors (especially in developing countries) have rejected the term. They argue that the 'fragile' label creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it deters the external investment that developing countries often seek when attempting to foster sustainable development.

State fragility has also been tied very closely to the idea of state failure, as exemplified by the Fund for Peace's decision in 2014 to change the name of its annual Failed States Index to the Fragile States Index. While the methodology of the index remains the same, the purpose of the name change is to move away from a discourse that shames governments, towards one that supports governments to improve conditions that might lead to violent conflict. It recognizes that 'all states, to different degrees, face conditions that threaten the livelihoods of their citizens'.<sup>3</sup>

## Advantages and disadvantages of 'state fragility'

While discourse on state fragility has played an influential role in the securitization of development and the subsequent focus on state-building,<sup>4</sup> the conceptual ambiguity of the fragile state label has led several scholars to question its value. 'Fragility' implies a lack of state capacity, yet many states labelled as fragile demonstrate less a lack of capacity, and more a lack of willingness to provide for their citizens.

Indeed, the fragile state label obscures questions about legitimacy and whether or not a state is authoritarian. If a state is both fragile and authoritarian, strengthening its capacity may reduce its fragility but may not necessarily make it less authoritarian. For example, research shows how states like Rwanda and Uganda have been able to use the 'fragile state' label to secure donor funding. However, both states have also showed considerable capacity (in positive terms through service delivery, and in negative terms through repression) while receiving such aid, further demonstrating how the fragile state label has been used to support their leaderships' own needs (Fisher, 2014).

## Endnotes

1. OECD (n.d.) 'State Fragility and Statebuilding' web page
2. See Mcloughlin, C. (2014). *State Legitimacy*. (DLP Concept Brief 02). Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program

*"... the normative power of the 'fragile state' label should not be underestimated"*

The state fragility discourse has been used to reify as fact the assumption that state failure is the cause of conflict, and that state-building is the natural solution to preventing and/or overcoming such conflict. However, in many developing countries non-state solutions promoting peace and development have proven effective.

Some research suggests that, rather than focusing on state fragility, it is analytically more useful to focus on the limits of statehood, and understand state power as part of a wider network of governance mechanisms. For example, statehood can be limited territorially (state weakness in certain parts of a country); sectorally (weakness in particular policy areas); socially (weakness in the eyes of parts of the population); and temporally (temporary weakness) (Risse, 2011). The concept of limited statehood acknowledges that, despite reduced formal state capacity, even the most fragile of states rarely remain ungoverned. The focus on state fragility obscures the myriad ways in which societies organize themselves even in the absence of formal state structures.

## Conclusion

The concept of state fragility has gained increasing traction in development thinking over the last decade. Overcoming fragility and moving towards resilience has been a driving incentive behind efforts to promote stabilization and state-building in a number of fragile and conflict-affected states. Although the term remains only loosely defined, the normative power of the 'fragile state' label should not be underestimated. It is important therefore for researchers and policy-makers to consider carefully how the label is used, the interesting (potentially non-state) dynamics it can obscure, and that the act of labelling itself may have unintended consequences.

## Further reading

- Fisher, J. (2014). *When it pays to be a "fragile state": Uganda's use and abuse of a dubious concept*. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(2): 197-209
- Grimm, S., Lemay-Hébert, N. and Nay, O. (2014). *'Fragile States': Introducing a Political Concept*. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(2): 316-332
- Mallett, R., Harvey, P., and Slater, R. (2014). *How to study capacity support to states in fragile and conflict-affected situations: An analytical framework*. SLRC Working Paper 15. London: ODI
- Mcloughlin, C. (2012). *Topic Guide on Fragile States*. Birmingham: GSDRC, University of Birmingham
- OECD (2010). *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*. DAC Guidelines and Reference Series. Paris: OECD Publishing
- Putzel, J. (2010). *Why Development Actors Need a Better Definition of 'State Fragility'*. Policy Directions. London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE
- Risse, T. (2011). *Governance Without a State? Policies and Politics in Areas of Limited Statehood*. New York: Columbia University Press

3. Fragile States Index (2014), published in *Foreign Policy*
4. Marquette, H. & Beswick, D. (2011). *State-building, Security and Development: State-building as a new development paradigm?* *Third World Quarterly*, 32(10): 1703-1714

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with University College London (UCL) and La Trobe University in Melbourne. DLP's independent program of research is supported by the Australian aid program.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the DLP, its partner organisations or the Australian Government.

The Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
School of Government and Society  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK  
info@diprogram.org