1. Introduction to the Handbook of Fragile States

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This Handbook has three objectives: to examine the causes, costs and consequences of state fragility, to understand how theory and methods are applied in fragile states contexts, and to examine how effective policies can be developed and applied to fragile states contexts.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This volume’s contribution to theory can be understood in the context of moving the debate forward on what fragility is and what it is not (see in particular Chapters 2, 3, and 4). A key question authors seek to answer is how to solve the fragility puzzle with specific reference to capacity and legitimacy traps, methodological and analytical limitations and boundaries, and conceptual framing. A related challenge is estimating the costs of fragility. Research shows that the costs of fragility are quite high. These costs can be understood as a loss of growth; where violence is present, an even greater loss of annual growth is expected. There are also those costs imposed on neighboring states which can be greater than in the fragile state itself.

The idea of fragility as a contested concept is central to these debates. Similarly, the proper role of institutions and the symptomatic effects of violence and instability need to be properly understood. Capacity traps are those where countries have failed to improve state capacity to provide security and social services and that consequently have failed also to establish state legitimacy. Legitimacy traps occur in countries that have demonstrated a high capacity to provide security and services to the population but that suffer from shaky legitimacy due to expanding inequalities and authoritarian management. Countries that combine low income with poor economic policies and institutions are often deemed fragile.

Thus, an accepted argument is that fragility relates to a state’s (in)ability to fulfill its basic functions, something that is also denoted as statehood. Resilience is often understood as the logical inverse of fragility though this is not entirely correct. If we take as a given that fragility is multivariate and multidimensional (see Chapter 6) then a unidimensional linear link between resilience and fragility takes into account only some of the dimensions that are pertinent to defining fragility. Indeed, as authors demonstrate in this volume, fragility is multidimensional, which can be understood as effective control over territory and peoples, the degree to which a state serves as a means to service the public through the social contract, and developing and sustaining the means to build a common framing of the rules which govern that contract.

In the abstract we will find that there are many interpretations in the extant literature that hold a similar perspective on the need for multidimensionality embedded in theory. In turn, this general acceptance has allowed those who build theory and those who develop policies to identify core priority areas such as overcoming extreme poverty, addressing democratic deficits, and preventing vulnerabilities to conflict from being exploited. The idea is to put the emphasis on structural conditions as the root cause of state fragility and state failure, notably social fragility and the self-serving external interventions of foreign powers.
State-building is a complex, unpredictable, and endogenous endeavor, affected significantly by local contexts and conditions. There is no standard formula. It progresses through mutually reinforcing interactions between the enhancement of state capacity to deliver security and services, and the improvement of state legitimacy. In this context, there is the need to examine fragility in a country more broadly and consider regional spillovers, while also promoting the coordination of initiatives at the local, regional, and international levels. In turn, more accountability is needed from donors to ensure long-term coordination. This includes providing technical assistance to recipient institutions and organizations so that they do not become overly dependent on foreign aid.

Thus, this volume contributes to a better understanding of fragility by showing that indeed there are theoretical underpinnings without which confusion between causes, symptoms, and outcomes can persist. In turn policy development and effectiveness is weakened.

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

As the development challenges facing fragile states became better understood, the World Bank Group’s terminology has evolved over the years: from Low Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS) 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 OECD (see Chapter 6), 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 2022 report, the OECD (2022) identified 60 fragile contexts (including 15 extremely fragile contexts) while the World Bank Group lists 39 countries in fragile and conflict-affected situations in fiscal year 2023, and thus a much smaller number than the OECD (2022). Despite these differences, there is a consensus that a group of countries labeled as fragile, including a few that have been trapped in fragility for decades, has been continually vulnerable over time despite receiving significant amounts of development assistance.

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. 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 (UCDP) indicate an increase in organized violence of 46 percent in 2021 due to conflicts in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Yemen. 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 (see Chapter 10). 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 and development assistance are pressing and real in fragile contexts. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Afghanistan (see Chapters 18 and 20) – a country trapped in fragility – where net official development assistance as a percentage of that country’s gross national income was more than 20 percent in recent years (World Development Indicators Database, 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 OECD States of Fragility 2020 report and reports that Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries gave more than US$60 billion, or 63 percent 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) – building on the World Bank (1998) assessing aid report – and those of other macro aid effectiveness studies that 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) found 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 would 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 of new actors – such as non-DAC donors, private philanthropic foundations, and global funds – in recent years, 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. program or budget support, multi-donor trust funds), whether bilateral 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, or the g7+ New Deal (see Chapter 22 in this volume) on Fragile States. On paper and in theory, these principles make sense for the most part; their applications, however, have been more difficult.

IS LEGITIMACY THE ANSWER?

First generation analysis of state fragility and failure tended to not put proper emphasis on the role of society, citizenry, and the state as interdependent political entities. A key element in our understanding of state fragility is therefore the social contract which puts citizens and the state into a principal-agent relationship.

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 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 and external threats. 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 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. The key point 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 is 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, 2019).

In fragility analysis, the term under-governed spaces has similar meaning (Carment and Samy, 2019). 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 underserviced and disengaged from the national political scene. The prevalence of hybrid regime design among fragile states reflects this relationship between governed and under-governed spaces. Hybrid states (see Chapters 8 and 9) are those
that have not transitioned towards fuller liberalization or consolidated democracy and are stuck in a low-level equilibrium. Many of these states are not partway through a “transition.” Hybrid regimes are deliberately designed to “maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails” (Ottaway, 2003, p. 3). Marshall, in Chapter 8 in this volume argues that hybrid regimes 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.

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 (see Chapter 15 for an examination of this issue in the case of Palestinian refugees in Jordan). At the same time, later efforts to reform these inequalities via direct action can be stymied by that same lack of legitimacy. 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.

Afghanistan (see Chapters 18 and 20) provides a sobering example. With a price tag of over $2 trillion for the United States alone, the intervention in Afghanistan turned out to be one of the costliest and most unsuccessful campaigns undertaken by Washington and its allies (Carment and Belo, 2021). 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 regards 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 (SIGAR) 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 fueling corruption more than development goals (Carment et al., 2019).

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 programs 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.

Deeply fragile states such as Afghanistan face internal legitimacy challenges. Due to “isomorphic mimicry” and “premature load bearing,” Pritchett et al. (2013) 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, should 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 is 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.

It is often understood that the two most prominent features of fragility are armed conflict and chronic poverty. However, legitimacy traps show that these are more often than not symptomatic of more fundamental problems in which a lack of capacity to provide for citizens and low legitimacy are the primary determinants of state fragility. In this context it is useful to consider how a combination of legitimacy and capacity traps generated negative outcomes for Syria in the leadup to the conflict that emerged there during the Arab Spring (see Chapter 17 on the Middle East and North Africa). Although droughts for the period 2007–2010 served as an accelerant to increasing fragility, more important causal factors related to unsustainable policies in the management of groundwater and agriculture. Decreased rainfall reduced the effectiveness of irrigation canals, leading to an over extraction of groundwater. The net result was a significant decline in agricultural production over that period leading to the movement of over 1 million people from rural areas to urban centers. This mass internal migration added strain to neglected regions already under considerable pressure from strong population growth and an influx of Iraqi refugees. Migration increased unemployment, rampant unrest, and corruption and inequality.

In sub-Saharan Africa (see Chapter 16) we can see how capacity and legitimacy traps are endemic. These traps are more frequently understood as some combination of weak governments, insufficient security and legal frameworks, ineffective administration, poor public services, high rates of conflicts, and extreme poverty. Such persistence not only affects state performance, it also hinders the effectiveness of aid within the region. A key aspect inherent in fragility persistence is the importance of informal institutions and the leadership that generates rents as de facto power holders. Here the relationship between formal and informal governance structures and whether or not they have a positive or negative impact on formal state-building is central. Formal and informal state-building are two distinct processes that can be in conflict with each other (see Chapter 9 by Debiel and Dombrowski in this volume).

Consider that for more than 20 years, Somalia has been without a state; it is therefore considered a “failed state.” International depictions of Somalia tend to oscillate somewhere between the two extremes of Hobbesian state of nature akin to the post-apocalyptic dystopian world of Mad Max, and a libertarian paradise. In 1995, when the UN mission left the country, there was no functioning central government. However, very quickly there began to form a haphazard patchwork of political orders. These were heavily but not exclusively reliant on traditional authority and customary norms such as tribal elders. The precise nature of the political and social order that was created would be shaped significantly by the actors that
happened to be there. Where warlords existed in the new post-state environment, they formed military-backed regimes. In other places, women’s groups and local community elders banded together. The vast disparity between these two examples of political orders is more reliant on the multi-faceted local environments than on what “natural” state formation looks like. In some instances, informal state mechanisms are superior to formal state mechanisms because of how quickly they form and their ability to do this without direction from a central state, how in-tune and compatible they are with local conditions as well as local actors and powerbrokers, and how they can simply perform qualitatively better than formal mechanisms.

Another key factor exemplified in the social contract that upholds state legitimacy is social identity and as noted earlier potentially damaging horizontal inequalities (see Chapter 15) that emerge therein. Social identity (e.g. gender and ethnicity) can indirectly make households more or less vulnerable to poverty. These dynamics are exacerbated in fragile states such that conflict is more likely where there are significant political or economic inequalities. This is because groups typically mobilize where there is persistent and chronic targeted actions that render such identities more salient. Although vertical inequalities are more recognized, international policy-makers often overlook the importance of including horizontal inequalities in their analysis, in particular ethnic, and more recently the gender emphasis (see Chapter 11 by Koester in this volume). It is possible to therefore understand how poor state legitimacy, horizontal inequalities, and fragility go hand in hand, if for example, a food shortage produced extreme vulnerabilities amongst vulnerable groups or conversely certain groups were provided access or given special rights over resources.

THE RENTIER STATE AND THE FAILURE TO REFORM AS IMPEDIMENTS TO DEMOCRACY

As we note above, aid can be a contributor to a breakdown in state legitimacy. Relationships with donors can incentivize a rent management architecture and patronage system that help to consolidate a ruling regime’s hold on power. Rentier state theory in particular examines the effect of non-tax revenue on recipient states. Rentierism is associated with state fragility because it discourages the development of effective capacity indicators, reduces efforts to build legitimacy, and allows states to lean heavily on authority measures to govern. Rentier state theory focuses on stability (provisional versus sustainable) and political legitimacy (positive versus negative) to explain why rentier regimes can produce provisional stability.

In this context, rentier research has almost exclusively focused on natural resource rents with less attention paid to non-tax revenues delivered to states from the international community. While non-tax revenues certainly can contribute to the strength and dominance of a ruling party, they can also give the state a high level of autonomy. In contrast, high levels of foreign aid can reduce elite needs for the development of alternative revenue streams in the form of productive industries. Aid dependence can thus prevent both the development of effective state capacity (erosion of the tax base) and legitimacy (limited investments in democratic institutions). Aid and natural resource rents may lead to the ruling elite postponing reforms.

In a deglobalized world caught in an economic slump and recovering from a pandemic where inequality is increasing across and within nations, broadly focused economic outcomes are now more important than ever. This is certainly the message that China brings to the developing world and explains, in part, why it has achieved great success in developing
countries. As Chapter 5 shows, even for the US, democracy itself has provided fertile ground from which inward-looking nationalist policies have grown. The rise of populist nationalism emerges where liberal democracies coexist alongside deep-rooted inequalities. The economic and political grievances of today whether real or perceived have been framed by leaders like Donald Trump as an affront to their dignity.

What are the implications for aid effectiveness? Pritchett et al. (2010, 2013) 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. 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.

COVID-19

If fragile states perform poorly on authority and legitimacy measures as demonstrated above, capacity, especially in regards 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 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 (Gertz and Kharas, 2018; Foresight Africa, 2019).

Second, evidence gathered in the last few years (see for example, ODI, 2018) had shown that very few fragile states 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, conflict and violence, inequalities, refugees and forced displacement as noted above – 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 indicated that global absolute poverty would rise by 40 to 60 million, causing it to go back to 2017 levels, and more pessimistic scenarios by Sumner et al. (2020) indicated an increase in poverty of 420 to 580 million people under a 20 percent 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 percent and 7 percent 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 August 4, 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 typically not among the top 40 fragile countries in the ranking of the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) project and was in fact in 53rd position recently.

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 despite measures to contain Covid-19 that included protocols for social distancing, reduced mobility and border controls, as well as restrictions on refugees such as curfews. 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 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 that 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.

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 fragile states, long-term recovery depends on developing vaccines, containing the virus, and stopping re-infections. Indirect impacts include lower demand for commodity exports and reduced mobility for aid programming in urban centers. 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 gave 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 analyzed. Fifty-six percent of people did not have access to primary healthcare services and over half of the health facilities in the country were not operational.

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 nonexistent infrastructure, long-term chronic underfunding, and limited numbers of hospital beds and 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 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.

Fragile states also lack the capacity to implement containment and contact-tracing measures. For example, testing facilities and equipment are, in general, virtually nonexistent in many fragile states. 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 were one of the only recourses for some states seeking to limit the spread of Covid-19.

The UN’s Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to the Covid-19 Crisis warned, “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, p. 3). Another direct example of Covid-19’s economic impact are mass job losses. These job losses will continue to impact the citizens of fragile states, 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.”

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.

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 fragile states 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.

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. 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 socioeconomic conditions in fragile states deteriorate further. In contrast, some limited and emergent evidence suggests that the pandemic might have contributed to a successful restart of stalled ceasefire negotiations in Afghanistan before the country eventually fell to the Taliban. 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 programs 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 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 into account 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 reduce any negative impacts the pandemic might have on the success of donor projects 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.

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, which 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 percent of the gross domestic product of Tajikistan, 28 percent for the Kyrgyz Republic, and almost 12 percent for Uzbekistan. The fall of the ruble against the dollar 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.

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 aluminum 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.

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.

THE CHAPTERS

In a thorough review of the extant literature Sonja Grimm’s Chapter 2 examines the root causes of state fragility. Grimm considers the baseline concept of a functioning and stable “state,” and fragility at the sub-state level creating “situations of fragility,” as well as the importance of specific societal and sub-state contexts. She concludes by showing that it is necessary to understand, analyze, and explain fragility in reference to existing well-functioning states.

Chapter 3, “Transforming conception(s) of state fragility and new containment interventions” by Nicolas Lemay-Hébert and Babatunde Obamamoye walks the reader through the discourse on state fragility and its evolution in relation to how the concept has influenced and impacted donors’ policies towards fragile states. Their chapter focuses on the shift in the conceptualization of state fragility from purely capacity deficit to risk mitigation, and how this has given rise to new containment interventions in fragile states. The chapter draws on evidence from interventions in the West African Sahel to support their argument. The chapter concludes with insights on fragile states policies as a form of containment serving as the major instrument through which the developed world protects itself.

Chapter 4, titled “Current conceptualizations and measurements of state fragility: recent developments and remaining limits” by Ines Ferreira takes a critical view of fragility measures, specifically universally applied quantitatively derived indices. This chapter is not only an important stock taking, but it also provides insights on the methodological limitations underlying such single rank indices and the policies derived from them by highlighting the move towards multidimensionality, as well as the limits that remain in terms of the data used, and the transparency of the indicators chosen.

Chapter 5, “The United States is vulnerable: a flashing red light in the Fragile States Index” by Nate Haken and Natalie Fiertz takes up an important question in regards to fragility as a conceptually limited framing. The authors make a compelling case for a recasting of fragility by considering how a country’s wealth and power can mask measurable long-term worsening in key cohesion indicators, and a rise in retrenchment populism and scapegoating. This chapter considers how tools like the Fragile States Index can be improved to diagnose fragility and resilience, and considers implications of precarity for countries such as the United States whose destabilization would have cascading effects across the entire world.

In Chapter 6, Harsh Desai and Jonathan Marley walk the reader through the argument underpinning the need for a multidimensional approach to measuring state fragility. The authors...
draw on their experience with the OECD Fragility Index to illustrate the rationale behind and the importance of a multidimensional approach to measuring fragility. Fragility is a multidimensional phenomenon that evades simple or straightforward measurement. Nevertheless, a number of assessments, measurements, and indices have long been used to capture this multidimensionality to inform evidence-based policy and practice in fragile states. These approaches involve disaggregating fragility into its component parts – with different points of emphasis on the state, society, or system – and measuring countries’ performance along these parts to help better define vulnerabilities and entry points for interventions.

Chapter 7 on “Strategic approaches in fragile societies: targeting drivers,” by Seth Kaplan digs deep into questions regarding drivers of fragility. Kaplan looks at two key drivers, namely social cohesion and institutionalization, and argues that together these determine the capacity of a population to cooperate and more importantly to direct this cooperation toward national-level challenges. When they are both lacking, a population has few mechanisms to encourage cooperation, yielding an inherently unstable – fragile – sociopolitical dynamic.

In Chapter 8, Monty Marshall examines the importance of “hybridization,” which means mixing autocratic and democratic institutions. Hybridity is an important facet of fragile states analysis. Drawing on over three decades of research, Marshall examines what is meant by political authority. His study discusses the Polity-related research findings of the “Gurr School,” the US Government’s Political Instability Task Force (PITF), and Center for Systemic Peace, to summarize the transient and transitional effects of “hybrid authority systems” and, especially, factionalism on political stability and sustainability in complex societal systems. Marshall details his systemic “political process model” informed by the PITF “forecasting” initiative to map general system dynamics of political instability. The ability to anticipate, or forecast, political instability presumes a common, formal structure that conditions and channels systemic political behaviors in predictable ways. As such, Marshall demonstrates the value of systematic coding and evaluation for the purposes of improving policy responses to fragile states.

In the next and closely related chapter titled “Hybrid political orders in fragile contexts,” Tobias Debiel and Stephan Dombrowski frame hybridity as hybrid political orders (HPOs). By drawing on the example of Somaliland, the authors identify four decisive factors for resilient HPOs: the establishment of trust and respective interaction beyond the specific clan structures, the forming of dominant and inclusive political coalitions, the support of formal state structures, and Shared Mental Models (SMM). According to the authors, these prerequisites did not obtain in Afghanistan. When present, HPOs can contribute to the successful transition of violence-prone societies. Their inherent restrictions, however, become evident in the process of state formation that requires rule standardization rather than the plurality of norms and institutions.

In Chapter 10, “Implications of fragility for growth, poverty, and inequality,” Karla Cisneros Rosado and Yiagadeesen Samy critically evaluate the empirical evidence to determine which fragile states are likely to achieve some degree of success in overcoming low growth, achieving poverty reduction, and decreasing inequality. The authors note that fragile states have been deeply affected by the pandemic and more recently the war in Ukraine. Absolute poverty increased in fragile states in 2020 and it is concentrated in a few countries such as Nigeria (15 percent), the Democratic Republic of Congo (11.90 percent), Tanzania (5.38 percent), Ethiopia (4.25 percent) and Madagascar (4.11 percent). Their study shows that poverty will continue to be concentrated in fragile states. By 2030 large portions of the
global population living in extreme poverty will be concentrated in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, at 18.1 percent and 11.7 percent respectively, as well as Tanzania (4.4 percent), Madagascar (4.3 percent), Venezuela (3.9 percent), Angola (3.8 percent), Yemen (3.7 percent), and Afghanistan (3.3 percent). The chapter also examines the relationship between growth, poverty, and inequality in fragile states.

In Chapter 11, “Just ‘add women and stir’? Bringing gender into fragility debates,” Diana Koester argues that research on the relationship between gender and fragility is underemphasized in the literature. Koester argues that considering gender not only adds individual issues to the analysis but it also helps bridge the public–private divide inherent in common perspectives on fragility. Gender analysis improves our understanding of the nature of fragility risks as both threats and opportunities. Koester makes a strong argument pointing to the limitations inherent in the state-centered paradigm commonly at the heart of fragility debates. By contributing to a more comprehensive perspective on fragility, Koester’s chapter identifies a greater diversity of entry points for practical efforts to address fragility and gender inequality.

Charles Martin-Shields’ chapter on “The relationship between state fragility and refugees” shows how refugee movements and state fragility are interlinked. Martin-Shields uses quantitative measures to show that a substantial number of people decide to move between states characterized by low capacity and not just in response to conflict and violence. This chapter comes at a crucial time when international efforts like the Global Compacts are being implemented. To fully realize the policy and research opportunities that come with understanding the relationship between state fragility and forced displacement, processes like the Global Compact on Refugees will need rigorous data analysis. This chapter provides a clear path forward for both research and policy development.

Chapter 13, “Climate change and fragility: improving early warning and climate-proofing development and conflict interventions,” by Erin Sikorsky, Francesco Femia, and Brigitte Hugh shows how climate change and fragility are related. A number of factors can be identified, including climate pressures on land, food, and water and energy systems, and states’ abilities to govern and manage these systems. In addition to assessing causal effects and impacts, the authors provide solutions consistent with the Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent (R2P2) framework: improved early warning capabilities and “climate-proofed” development and conflict interventions.

In Chapter 14, Robert Muggah revisits the nascent concept of urban fragility and its evolution in academic and policy communities. The author applies state-level concepts of authority, capacity, and legitimacy to cities, and finds that most cities around the world exhibit varying dimensions and degrees of fragility that change over time. Muggah argues that a quantitative evaluation of the risks of fragility in cities, as opposed to nation states, may offer a better avenue to address fragility and can help inform strategies to strengthen urban resilience.

Chapter 15 by Zina Nimeh considers the case of Palestinian refugees in Jordan to discuss horizontal inequality as a contributory element of fragility. Horizontal inequality is operationalized by examining wellbeing, which is in turn conceptualized multidimensionally. The chapter finds that there are inequalities and variations among Palestinian refugee groups. Such unequal outcomes in terms of wellbeing, access to basic services, and resources and employment, reinforce prejudice, discrimination, and social exclusion, and ultimately exacerbate fragility. A key message of the chapter is to focus on equality and social cohesion when thinking about policies and programs for human development and state-building.
Robert Rotberg’s chapter on “The African fragility problem” argues that most African countries are weak and lacking in good governance in that they do not provide enough of high quality essential political goods to their peoples. The author explores a number of these political goods, namely security, safety, rule of law, transparency, political participation, respect for human rights, and human development, to illustrate how they are lacking across most African countries. After discussing the challenges that African countries faced due to Covid-19 and the poor medical situation across the continent, the chapter concludes that there is a need to focus on responsible leadership – through both external and internal efforts – to reduce the spread of fragility.

Chapter 17 by Hamid Ali, Mahmoud Elmakkawe, and Nesreen Nasser Alanbar focuses on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from 2006 to 2020 and examines the dynamic interplay between state fragility and sustainable development. The authors conduct an empirical analysis of the impact of fragility – which consists of social, economic, and political indices from the Fragile States Index – on measures of sustainable development that include GDP growth, the women business and law index, and health expenditure as dependent variables. The chapter finds that factors such as group grievances and military expenditures have significantly affected GDP and spending on social services, and that women were particularly impacted by the forces of repression, ultimately increasing the region’s fragility. Perhaps surprisingly, the authors argue that fragility in the MENA region may have more to do with the social aspects of services instead of the political aspects of democratic governance, which policymakers should keep in mind when designing interventions.

Chapter 18 by Said Yaqub Ibrahimi examines the causes and conditions that led to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. Drawing on both empirical evidence and qualitative analysis, the chapter uses the three variables of legitimacy, authority, and capacity to examine the causes and consequences of state collapse in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. The chapter concludes that lack of legitimacy was the most significant factor that led to the destruction of institutions and the sense of statehood. Such a result, in the words of the author, “challenges external state-building and its neo-institutional philosophy” that failed to achieve a comprehensive political settlement, thus weakening the influence of the US in the region while opening the door for regional players to increase theirs.

In Chapter 19, Michaël Goujon and Laurent Wagner examine the fragility of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), that tend to be generally characterized by good levels of governance and an absence of large-scale conflict. Caribbean SIDS, for example, are characterized by a high level of criminality due to drug trafficking, and fragility in SIDS is disconnected from usual drivers of conflict such as income and human development. The authors argue that the fragility of SIDS should be examined through other specific vulnerabilities that affect sustainable development, namely structural economic vulnerability (such as smallness, remoteness, and dependency on trade, remittances, or aid), vulnerability to climate change (such as sea level rise), and situational factors (such as crime and vulnerability to pandemics). SIDS will only achieve sustainable development if they can become more resilient to environmental and economic shocks and this includes a combination of institutional reforms and development plans to reduce general vulnerability.

In the next chapter on “Securitization, divergent agendas and the sectoral allocation of development aid within Afghanistan,” Mark McGillivray and Safiullah Taye focus on the official development assistance that Germany – as the second largest donor – has provided to Afghanistan since 2002. Germany’s approach was deemed interesting not just because of the
volume of support that it provided but also because of its participatory approach with a range of stakeholders. The authors carefully document how donors’ economic and political motives diverged from those of the Afghan government, making it difficult to agree about which sectors aid should be allocated to. Specifically, the securitization of aid shows the challenges that donors face in fragile states in trying to find the right balance between security and development, especially when security objectives are over-emphasized.

In Chapter 21, David Carment and Emilia Vydelingum examine how diaspora can shape exits from fragility using host–homeland relations between Canada and Bangladesh as their case study. The authors draw on concepts related to positionality (the extent to which the diaspora associates itself with, and has the capacity to influence, host state policy) and alignment (the extent to which diaspora and host state interests converge) to understand diaspora strategies in host states and then examine the conditions under which diaspora can influence policy reform in home states. The chapter then analyzes six linkages or proxies (two for each of authority, legitimacy, and capacity) that shape Canada–Bangladesh diaspora relations. It finds that the Canadian Bangladeshi diaspora does not rank high on positionality but enjoys reasonable alignment, and concludes that it supported Bangladesh’s exit from fragility, even if that is not the only factor.

The next chapter by Habib ur Rehman Mayar, Helder da Costa, and Felix Piedade examines the factors that led to the creation of the g7+, its agenda and impact, and the challenges that it has faced. As an intergovernmental organization, first established as an informal group of conflict-affected countries in 2010, the g7+ was formed to allow recipient countries to own their trajectories and be more vocal about the design of peacekeeping, humanitarian, and peacebuilding operations. Bringing together g7+ members and donors, the forum of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) developed a new set of principles for engaging in fragile situations, known as the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States. These principles were endorsed in 2011 at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness. Despite limited progress in implementing the principles, the authors suggest that the New Deal contains useful tools to reform peacebuilding and state-building policies and that its success will depend on the commitment and support of IDPS members, namely g7+ and OECD donors.

Chapter 23 by Julian Bergmann and Mark Furness discusses the EU’s approach to fragile states and argues that its evolution has been shaped by contestation over norms, actors, and practices in EU foreign and development policy. Specifically, there is a contestation between solidarity with people living in fragile countries and the protection of European interests, values, and citizens. This is illustrated through an examination of the EU’s engagement in Afghanistan, Libya, and Mali, which has yielded mixed results and incoherence as a result of diverging security interests of EU member states. As a result, the EU’s contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding has become weaker despite the successful development of a comprehensive strategic framework for addressing state fragility.

The final chapter by Rachael Calleja and Sarah Rose delves into aid coordination and analyzes the “country platform” coordination model as a potential solution to coordination challenges in fragile states. Country platforms are government-led coordinating bodies that bring donors and other partners (development partners, civil society, and the private sector) together to coordinate development and peacebuilding or security efforts. The chapter discusses six principles for effective country platforms, the main tradeoffs and risks that the country platforms face in fragile states, and how to manage these challenges. The authors argue that there
is still room to better coordinate development efforts and that more investments in critical aid architecture systems are needed by donors.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank the Faculty of Public Affairs at Carleton University, and the editors and production team at Edward Elgar Publishing, for supporting this project.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, we use the terms “fragile states” and “fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS)” interchangeably in this volume, even if not all fragile states are affected by conflict while most (though not all) conflict-affected states are fragile almost by definition.

3. 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 are 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).

4. See https://www.carleton.ca/cifp.


8. See for example https://www.carleton.ca/cifp.

REFERENCES


World Development Indicators Database. World Bank.