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Foreign Aid and the Fragile Consensus on State Fragility

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Abstract

Most actors in the field of foreign aid agree with the call for coordinated engagement in fragile states in order to more effectively counter the consequences and origins of state failure. However, despite such demands, governments from OECD countries as well as multilateral agencies that are engaged in fragile states often continue to act in an uncoordinated manner and fail to reach higher levels of harmonisation. Why is effective coordination so hard to achieve? This article argues that three major challenges explain the persistent problems of donor harmonisation in fragile states: (1) the cognitive challenge of explaining the origins of state fragility and deducing effective instruments and interventions; (2) the political challenge of reconciling divergent political motives for engagement; as well as (3) the challenge related to the organisational logic of competing aid agencies.

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Abbreviations

AUSAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung / Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
M.A.E.	Ministère des Affaires étrangères
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WDR	World Development Report

1 Introduction

Fragile states are difficult territory – not only for their citizens, who suffer immediately from poorly performing, defunct or hardly existing governments, but also for international actors, who see themselves confronted with the challenge to offer remedies for the ills of state fragility. This applies especially to international development agencies. Once passive bystanders to state decay and civil wars in their countries of operation, these organisations have increasingly become crucial actors with a set of instruments to offer beyond military coercion and diplomatic means; it includes engagement that comprises support for socio-economic development to mitigate sources of conflict as well as civilian advice, bureaucratic assistance and technical support to help states provide necessary political order and manage conflicts peacefully.

But why should donors interfere in fragile states in the first place? Unviable states have existed in the past, causing havoc at times, but evolving through disintegration or war into new, more viable entities. Today's international system severely restricts this type of evolution by largely banning both interstate and intrastate war.¹ States are no longer dissolved when they fail; they continue to exist as powerless hulls, with the rare exception of successful secession, such as in East Timor, South Sudan and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Stripped of the strongest force that allowed the restructuring of states, the international community discovered development policy as an alternative instrument for reforming weak states that are stuck in a development standoff.

Over the past ten years, every major international development organisation has issued its strategy papers and flagship reports on how to deal with countries in fragility or conflict.² Studying these documents, one can hardly deny that donors have come a long way to understanding the logic and dynamics of fragility and conflict far better and in a more nuanced fashion than only a decade ago.³ Arguably the most important achievement of all has been the widespread realisation that state fragility is indeed a *developmental* issue. Mitigating the fragility of states and strengthening their capacity to deliver security and other basic public goods has come to be seen as the *sine qua non* of any development efforts.⁴ Likewise, there is general agreement that addressing the challenge of state fragility is more than just another facet that has been added to the overburdened agenda of the development business. Rather, it is considered to be perhaps the most challenging task of all, involving intervention in the highly complex issue of how societies organise themselves to resolve fundamental social, economic and political problems.⁵

1 Desch (1996) and Herbst (1990) show how the ban on interstate war prevents the restructuring of state borders. The “responsibility to protect” (Evans 2008) is a principle that in effect commits major powers not to tolerate civil war characterised by mass atrocities.

2 Examples of relevant donor papers include OECD/DAC (2007); OECD (2011b); World Bank (2005, 2011); BMZ (2005, 2007); DFID (2005, 2010); USAID (2005); M.A.E. (2007); SIDA (2005).

3 A telling example is the World Bank's (2011) World Development Report “Conflict, Security, and Development”. For a critical review, which nonetheless concedes that the report constitutes significant progress when compared to “the Bank's standard development practices”, see Zaum (2012).

4 As early as 2006, Necla Tschirgi observed that “[t]he necessity of linking security and development has become a policy mantra” (Tschirgi 2006, 41).

5 On the importance official aid organisations attach to the topic of fragile states see, for example, United Nations (2004, 15; 2005a, 20–21; 2005b, 8) and OECD/DAC (2001, 37; 2008, 11). Among others,

In a marked improvement compared to earlier thinking (criticised, for instance, by Hameiri 2007), donors have begun to accept that state fragility cannot be effectively addressed if it is conceptualised as a purely technical issue, leaving aside the inherently political nature of state construction and its embeddedness in social and political conflicts. For example, in 2011, the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding – a joint forum of development agencies and fragile state governments – proposed a “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States”, giving priority to five “peacebuilding and statebuilding goals” of a highly political nature: legitimate politics, justice, security, economic foundations, and revenues and services.⁶

In addition to agreement on some basic notions of state fragility and on its crucial relevance for development assistance, there is also an emerging consensus that external interventions must be organised in a highly coordinated manner if they are to be effective at improving the “*state of the state*” (OECD/DAC 2008, 23). Thus, what has been perceived as a general challenge for increased aid effectiveness – the low level of harmonisation and coordination among donor agencies – is of particular relevance for aid interventions in fragile states.⁷

Yet, despite such efforts, a true agreement among the broader development community on priorities, strategies and instruments to address state fragility in concrete cases beyond general statements on joint objectives has not yet emerged. Equally, the level of coordination among donor agencies working in fragile states is far from sufficient, despite continuous promises of donor governments and multilateral agencies to better harmonise their interventions. While donor coordination is a persistent problem in most aid-receiving countries, a 2011 report on aid effectiveness from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) finds it particularly challenging in fragile states. In these environments, the commitment for improved coordination among donors has been found to be low and the implementation of related measures weak (OECD 2011a, 26–27). The report identifies some progress in crafting joint funding mechanisms in fragile states but also highlights the persistence of coordination problems: the existence of many parallel implementation units, parallel joint funding mechanisms, and the separation of coordination mechanisms related to humanitarian aid and development assistance. Moreover, donors still fall short of engaging in joint context analysis in order to reach a common understanding of the origins of – and the remedies for – state fragility in concrete country settings (OECD 2011a, 56, 65–66).

But why is effective coordination so hard to achieve, defying a decade of commitments to the contrary and a compelling case for joint approaches? Insufficient donor coordination in fragile states, this article argues, is not coincidental but caused by structural challenges. These challenges, we claim, come in three different types: a *cognitive challenge* that

North / Wallis / Weingast (2009) have recently made an influential scholarly contribution framing the entire development challenge as one of how basic issues of conflict and violence are organised within a society; see also North et al. (2007).

6 See online: <http://www.oecd.org/international%20dialogue/>.

7 Calls for more donor coordination and harmonisation are empirically backed by evidence showing how the fragmentation of donor agencies in aid-receiving countries negatively affects the quality of public administration and increases the level of corruption (Knack / Rahman 2007; Djankov / Montalvo / Reynal-Querol 2009).

emanates from unresolved uncertainties in the social sciences about the origins, triggers and drivers of development in general and the particular role of state fragility in this context; a *political challenge* rooted in the dilemma of whose well-being and security should reign supreme in the considerations of donor governments when “their security” and “our security” do not appear to call for the same set of actions; and a *bureaucratic challenge* originating in the natural interest of aid agencies – like any other organisations – to value their institutional survival higher than the achievement of goals they are expected to promote. All three challenges reflect deeper contradictions among external development actors and thus general problems of development policy, which are particularly salient in the case of state fragility.

The article is structured as follows. Sections two to four address each of these three challenges in turn. They first discuss briefly their general relevance for development policy and then focus on the consequences of the relevant challenge in the context of state fragility. Section five concludes by summarising our main arguments and suggesting potential avenues out of the current deadlock.

2 The cognitive challenge: What do we really know about state fragility?

In this section, we argue that the current notion of state fragility in the development discourse is based on an eclectic concept that is unsuitable as a starting point for donor coordination. We defend this claim by recounting how the term “fragility” was established in the donor community as a rather unspecific problem description for a heterogeneous group of countries. By disaggregating the concept of state fragility into its components, we illustrate the ambiguities that result, thereby exacerbating coordination problems. We argue that the concept of fragility can be useful for policy-oriented research nonetheless, and we point out a remedy to its current drawbacks: using an explicitly multidimensional, non-additive model of state fragility.

The limited consensus about the origins of economic and political development has traditionally been a crucial barrier to coordination and harmonisation in the field of development assistance.⁸ There is neither consensus across schools with different epistemological foundations (such as rational choice, critical or cultural perspectives) nor within the dominant rational choice framework. This is not a surprise or a drawback *per se*, since scientific progress is mostly made by contrasting opposing hypotheses, but a contested state of knowledge does not easily lend itself for coordinating policies.

For example, the debate on the origins of economic growth differs over the extent to which growth-enabling institutions are determined by geographic factors and historical junctures (Acemoglu / Johnson / Robinson 2002; Keefer / Knack 1997; Easterly 2001;

8 For instance, recent studies on multi-donor budget support show how persistent coordination problems among donors are often linked to their different visions of the instruments’ goal hierarchy: some donors perceive financing poverty alleviation as the primary objective while others attempt to use budget support as leverage for advancing systemic institutional reforms in the field of governance (Faust / Leiderer / Schmitt 2012). Another example relates to democracy promotion, where European and United States (US) actors are said to behave differently because of their different underlying concepts of democratisation processes (Magen / Risse / McFaul 2009).

Hansen / Tarp 2001; Gundlach / Paldam 2009). Consequently, recommendations on how to stimulate the establishment of such institutions differ substantially. Another example is the debate on democracy and development. On the one hand, there has been a revival of Seymour Lipset's (1959) hypothesis that economic development spurs the emergence of democratic institutions (Glaeser / Ponzetto / Shleifer 2007; Inglehart / Welzel 2009). On the other hand, empirical evidence also suggests an economic dividend for democratic countries (Lake / Baum 2001; Deacon 2009; Blaydes / Kayser 2011), indicating a reciprocal causal relationship.

Controversial, reciprocal or multi-causal explanations may be prudent from an academic viewpoint, but they hamper coordination efforts. Weak academic guardrails leave policy-makers with much latitude to choose their instruments and interventions, mainly according to their political and organisational preferences. True, the degree of latitude differs depending on the topic at hand. It is more pronounced in some areas of development policy than in others. The state fragility debate builds upon some of the most abstract and most complex socio-economic concepts. As a result, we argue, much of it has lost touch with its underlying theoretical foundations and has used inappropriate tools to analyse the matter of interest.⁹

Regarding, for instance, the origins of state failure, the international donor community has given much attention to the work on fragile states by renowned Oxford economist Paul Collier and his colleagues (Collier 2007). Based on research conducted for the World Bank, their studies claimed to have identified some of the most important sources of state failure and gave well-defined advice on how development cooperation should intervene in these situations. Unfortunately, however, an equally prestigious panel of economists – when evaluating the World Bank research output – dismissed several of Collier's conclusions on state fragility, arguing they were based on flawed concepts and a shallow transfer of correlations into causal mechanisms (Banerjee et al. 2006, 64). In this, as in many similar cases, a menu of diverse – or even contradictory – policy recommendations from academia provides policy-makers and practitioners with a large manoeuvring space to design aid according to their *a priori* preferences. Consequently, if a large variety of strategies can be justified as appropriate, coherent donor engagement becomes contingent upon other drivers of coordination. The problem itself – state fragility – no longer calls for it.

A brief look at the history of the concept of state fragility helps in understanding some of the complications related to its use.¹⁰ As a term, “fragility” summarises various antecedent denominations for weak, decaying, failed, failing and other forms of defunct states. The concept of fragility, which was initially conceived of in academic debates whose roots lay in theories of state formation, was taken up by policy-makers when faced with government failures in Haiti and Somalia (Helman / Ratner 1992), but soon forgotten due to comparatively low economic and political relevance. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 put weak states back on the agenda. Now they were assumed to be safe havens for

9 This is shown, for example, in analyses of state fragility indices (Gutiérrez et al. 2011; Ziaja 2012).

10 We do not aspire in this article to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on causes and consequences of fragility. Rather, our goal is to discuss the policy consequences resulting from some of the main trends in this literature. Some works that investigate the causes and consequences of fragility include Carment / Prest / Samy (2010); Inglehart (2009); and Patrick (2011).

terrorists, and thus a threat to the industrialised nations. While the new debate took previous literature on state formation (such as Tilly 1985; Migdal 1988; Desch 1996; Holsti 1996) into account, it referred more to its adjectives and labels than to the theories behind it (Khan 1995; Gros 1996; Milliken / Krause 2002; Rotberg 2003; Carment / Prest / Samy 2010). Given that many developing countries considered most of that terminology to be derogative, the aid community settled on “fragility” as a more neutral and less offensive term around the mid-2000s.¹¹

A variety of actors started developing indices to measure state fragility, including the Failed States Index by the Fund for Peace (2012) and the State Fragility Index by the Center for Systemic Peace (Marshall / Cole 2011).¹² These indices are usually accompanied by cautionary notes warning against the immediate transfer of index scores into policies. Nonetheless, their mere presence, ease of access and seeming objectivity make them highly attractive for use in policy circles (and beyond); influential policy documents, such as the World Development Report 2011 and the European Report on Development 2010, routinely refer to them.¹³

The conceptual history of state “fragility” demonstrates that the term has increasingly been understood to capture a variety of distinct, if interrelated, problems of statehood at the same time. Much of the literature settles on varieties of three main dimensions: controlling violence; addressing popular demands for representation; and guaranteeing minimal living standards. Using a terminology suggested by Carment / Prest / Samy (2010), these three dimensions can be rephrased as the main functions of the modern state: authority, legitimacy and capacity.

The authority function is, in its core, derived from a corporatist model of the state. A corporatist concept of fragility would be that of a state enterprise that has not yet muted civil resistance against its primacy. In line with Charles Tilly (1985), this strand sees the state as a “protection racket” gaining its profit and right to exist from the ambition to terminate civil war. As long as the cost of resistance remains lower than the cost of giving in, the population will continue to challenge this project. Following this view – even if the increased negotiating power of social groups in advanced nations forces the state to provide some extent of public goods – security remains by far the most important function of the state.

The legitimacy function may be described with a constructivist model of the state. States may award the right to exist to each other, or their citizens do, depending on the level of analysis chosen by the researcher (Wendt 1994; Anderson 1991). This view implies that

11 In 2003 the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) established the “Fragile States Group” as a specialised platform to “*deal with the specific issues and needs of fragile states*” (OECD 2006, 13). The term gained its ultimate international acceptance around 2010, when the “g7+”, a group of self-declared fragile states, established itself as an interest group vis-à-vis OECD donor countries and negotiated the “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States” adopted at the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in November 2012.

12 For an overview of these indices, see Fabra Mata / Ziaja (2009).

13 See also Paris (2001) for an account on how research and policy-making on fragile states affect each other.

the future of a state depends upon the acceptance by its own population, by other states and even by other states' populations.

The capacity function fits into a contractualist concept of the state. Here, one could define a fragile state as a subsystem of society whose boundaries and competences have not been properly defined – it is in conflict with society. There are several explications for the persistence of such a condition that draw on equilibria in their political economy, such as Joel Migdal's (1988) "*triangle of accommodation*" or Kalevi Holsti's (1996) "*state-strength dilemma*". The provision of public welfare figures as the most prominent function. States that neglect this task alienate their people.

One might therefore argue that fragility is a dispensable aggregate of already rather abstract concepts, appropriated by policy-makers and of little analytical utility. We would cautiously disagree for mainly two reasons. First, fragile statehood fills a gap on the continuous scale between the extremes of a (well-)functioning state and the state's full absence. Second, the concept of fragility points out the importance of considering state functions in their interactions. Whereas the different schools of thought have put more emphasis on one or the other basic function of the state, the concept of fragility offers a framework to re-examine the state with a thicker but nonetheless integrated and generalisable theory (see Coppedge 2012, 52–62).

It is true that many states underperform in all three categories, thus deserving to be labelled as "fragile" – but they do so in very different constellations. Colombia and Mozambique, for example, close neighbours on the 2012 Failed States Index (84.4 and 82.4 points each), lag behind in different state functions. The Colombian state is capable of providing public services, but challenged in its authority by rebel groups. In Mozambique, by contrast, the state struggles with providing basic services to its population, but there is currently no armed resistance against its authority. Maintaining this information beyond the aggregation stage is crucial to preserve the analytical utility of the fragility concept. Without a distinction at a disaggregated level, a diagnosis of "fragility" offers little by way of explanation, let alone promising ideas about how to overcome the "disease". In fact, policy guidelines have become more and more complex, encompassing an increasing number of considerations to capture such diverse realities as those in post-conflict Nepal and in post-war Iraq as well as in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and in post-revolutionary Libya. Unsurprisingly, in their efforts to provide guidance, donor platforms such as the International Network on Conflict and Fragility of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) resort to advice at the highest possible level of aggregation: principles and procedural recommendations (see OECD 2011b and OECD 2007). Thus, taking "*context as the starting point*" (OECD 2007, 1) has arguably become the policy truism sticking in policy-makers' minds more than any detail. While this is undeniably progress over any ideas of imposing blueprint solutions on a given fragile country, it is at the same time too generic to provide a promising platform from which a joint donor response could readily emerge. This is because, more often than not, disharmony will already have begun with the question of how to assess the quality of the given context.

Even a seemingly more concrete recommendation such as to "*focus on state-building as the central objective*" (OECD 2007, 2) does not bring harmonised strategies much closer, since state-building is meant as a generic concept for all activities that run directly counter

to the ills of fragility: support legitimacy and strengthen the capabilities of states, including the provision of security.

What is lacking is a more nuanced picture of state fragility between a single “score” for a fragile country on the one hand, and the anarchic picture that emerges when every country context is considered as qualitatively different. That such approaches are possible has recently been shown, both through formal modelling (Besley / Persson 2011) and through data-driven clustering (Grävingholt / Ziaja / Kreibaum 2012). A larger research programme along those lines – on the basis of which policy recommendations could be developed, tested and refined – has yet to emerge.

3 The political challenge: Security for whom?

Development assistance has traditionally been confronted with a political challenge: Which interests should it serve? Is aiding poor countries really about external development promotion, or is development assistance mainly an instrument of donor countries’ security and foreign economic policy? Obviously, politicians responsible for organising development assistance often neglect this tension and claim to prioritise the goal of development promotion. Nevertheless, there is abundant empirical evidence showing how the allocation of aid followed interests other than external development promotion, and some governments have typically been more outspoken in admitting to national interests taking precedence in foreign aid over others.¹⁴ Anecdotal as well as econometric evidence has demonstrated that selecting partner countries and allocating aid is often connected to particular interests of donor governments.¹⁵ During the Cold War, aid was often primarily used as an instrument to gain support of poor countries’ governments in the East-West confrontation. Even today, a disproportionate part of French and – to a lesser degree – British development assistance is allocated among their former colonies in order to maintain special influence in those countries. Almost all of Taiwan’s development assistance goes to governments that recognise the country as a sovereign state. Japanese aid in East and South East Asia has often been tied to buying Japanese products, and German technical cooperation is often tied to the use of German expertise. Humanitarian aid of the United States has gone disproportionately to countries that aligned with the United States on votes in the UN (Drury / Olson / Van Belle 2005). Thus, probably every donor government allocates aid not only according to altruistic motives, but has special diplomatic, security or economic interests at stake (e.g. Alesina / Dollar 2000; Claessens / Chong / Gradstein 2008; Cassimon / Campenhout 2009). Consequently, a donor’s motivation for coordinating his activities with others will be constrained by those very diplomatic, security or economic interests, resulting in inadequate coordination and harmonisation.

14 Traditionally, for instance, the United States has pursued foreign aid as a subordinate instrument to security interests, whereas in Germany, leftist and conservative coalition governments differed markedly in the extent to which they referred especially to economic interests as a legitimate concern in development cooperation.

15 For narrative evidence, see for instance Browne (2006); for econometric evidence, see Thacker (1999); Alesina / Dollar (2000); Dreher / Jensen (2007).

Harmonising strategies for fragile states also poses a political challenge. Whose interests are served when combating fragility? The general aid-allocation literature distinguishes several dimensions of donor interest that may be served by development aid. They include political (e.g. gaining support in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly), economic (e.g. opening markets), cultural (e.g. promoting colonial languages) and security concerns (e.g. containing terrorism). The latter is by far the most prominent when dealing with fragile states. Obviously, donor activities designed to address state fragility have an immediate bearing on a government's broader security concerns. Whereas at the conceptual level donor organisations and governments show a diversity of opinions on whether fragile statehood is best understood as an expression of failed development, a generic term for poor governance, or a state of imminent (or recently experienced) violent conflict, significant agreement exists that in the ultimate consequence, fragile states pose far-reaching security risks. Two prominent examples illustrate this line of reasoning. In 2004, the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change installed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – although avoiding the terminology of fragile states, but dealing with exactly those issues that, since then, have become part and parcel of the fragile-states agenda – argued that “[a]ny event or process that leads to large-scale death or lessening of life chances and undermines States as the basic unit of the international system is a threat to international security” (UN 2004, 12; emphasis added).

Three years later, the OECD-DAC's “Policy Commitment to Improve Development Effectiveness in Fragile States”, adopted at a High-Level Meeting of development ministers and heads of agency, while defining fragile states largely along the lines of underdevelopment coupled with bad governance, still maintained that “[t]he spill over effects resulting from state fragility – violent conflict, organized crime, migration, drug trafficking – resonate with concerns about international stability and global development” (OECD / DAC 2007, 4; emphasis added).

Clearly, for donor governments or development agencies, the urgency of the topic stems from its international or global implications – implications that are made even more explicit in individual donor countries' fragile-state strategies. Box 1 gives several examples derived from relevant donor strategy papers.

It is precisely the immediate security dimension that accounts for the highly politicised character of the debate on – and the practical responses to – the fragile states issue. Diverging political interests and a multitude of actors are common features of most policy areas and certainly not a distinctive feature of aid in general, nor the fragile states debate in particular. But state fragility causes major security concerns not only within societies suffering from fragile statehood but also in the outside world that fears being affected by all kinds of negative spill-over effects. Such effects result from governance failure, violent conflict and the existence of territories under no internationally accountable authority. The economic costs of civil war for neighbouring states, for example, have been well documented.¹⁶ Likewise, terrorist incidents that have been traced back to “safe havens” for terrorist organisations in territories under no government control have spurred an intense debate on the global effects of civil war and other forms of state failure (Mallaby

16 For an overview, see Collier et al. (2003, 33–41).

Box 1: Global security ramifications of state fragility – excerpts from donor strategies for fragile states

“When development and governance fail in a country, the consequences engulf entire regions and leap around the world.” (USAID 2002, Foreign Aid in the National Interest; quoted in USAID 2005, v)

“Events of the last few years have tragically brought home the reality that situations unfolding on the other side of the world—governments collapsing, criminal and terrorist networks, humanitarian crises, and grinding poverty—can have global ramifications. Weak states tend to be the vector for these destabilizing forces, manifesting the dark side of globalization, and pose a very difficult kind of national security challenge.” (USAID 2005, v)

“Our stakes in these countries are high. No conflict-affected country is on track to achieve a single Millennium Development Goal by the 2015 target. ... Conflict spreads across borders, and state failure can breed chaos and allow transnational crime and terrorism to flourish.” (USAID 2013)

“Fragile states can destabilise regional and global security.” (DFID 2005, 10)

“Conflict and fragility are significant challenges to international peace and security and to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).” (DFID 2010, 10)

“[...] fragile statehood and poor government performance can have a destabilising effect on neighbouring regions and give rise to threats on a global scale, including the spread of human rights abuses and conflicts, flight and migration, destruction of natural resources, weakening of regional economies and a growth in the power of the perpetrators of violence and their integration into transnational criminal economies (shadow globalisation).” (BMZ 2007, 10)

“For hundreds of years, strong and well-functioning states posed the greatest threats to global peace. Today, however, it is above all weak state structures which present a major challenge to global security. The destabilizing potential of weak states transcends state boundaries. Weak states serve as transshipment points for illicit trade in weapons, drugs and cultural property, and for human trafficking; they offer safe havens for terrorist networks, and they endanger unhindered legitimate commerce. In most cases, inaction bears major risks, including risks to our own security.” (AA / BMVg / BMZ 2012, 1)

“Disengagement is not an option. [...] Nor can any country simply isolate itself from fragile states when there are such clear but complex links to their own national security. [...] fragile states clearly affect national and regional security issues more broadly.” (Anderson 2005, 1, 3 [for AusAid])

2002). More recently, the resurgence of piracy is linked to fragile statehood in Somalia and elsewhere. Besides terrorism and piracy, increased production of narcotics and the accelerated spread of HIV/AIDS have also been counted among the most costly global side effects of major violent conflict (Collier et al. 2003, 41–49).

While diverging political interests and a multitude of actors are common features of many policy areas, the degree of contestation is particularly high when it comes to security matters – for obvious reasons: first, because among all preferences harboured in societies, security is a top priority concern commanding high levels of attention; and second, because different notions exist of what constitutes security and whose security deserves primary attention when state fragility is addressed. Thus, contestation begins with the very concept of security. It is useful, therefore, to recall recent developments in the international discourse on the concept of security.

Traditionally, security in the international arena has been conceived of as *national* (state) security, framing states as the relevant actors of international relations and defining the absence of physical or other external threats to the integrity and independence of a nation (state) as the ultimate goal of all efforts to achieve or maintain security. This state-centred concept of security is often considered an outcome of the “Peace of Westphalia” of 1648

and was a cornerstone of the “European balance of power” until the Napoleonic wars, and again of the “Concert of Europe” after 1815, and it has even prevailed throughout the Cold War period.

In Europe, an extended notion of national security – termed “comprehensive security” – gained popularity in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. The concept of comprehensive security was developed within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). It referred to the OSCE’s approach of addressing not only politico-military issues but also issues of economic cooperation, humanitarian aspects, the environment and others as relevant dimensions of security.¹⁷ Today, it is part of the OSCE’s identity to point out that references to human rights and fundamental freedoms as guiding principles in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, upon which the OSCE was built some 20 years later, “represented the first acknowledgement in an international document of the direct link between human rights and security” (OSCE 2007, 3). Thus, comprehensive security introduced a perspective on the individual human being into the security debate, although ultimately the nation-state remained the main actor and addressee in the OSCE security concept.

When development agencies began to increasingly turn their attention to security matters during the latter half of the 1990s, they often did so on the basis of a concept of *human* security. Human security was introduced in international discourse by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in the 1994 Human Development Report with the declared intention to shift the focus of attention from territories to people and from arms to development (UNDP 1994). Since then, human security has developed into a popular, if contested, concept of considerable persuasive power, at least in the political arena. While discussions about the analytical value and the exact scope of human security (broad vs. narrow conceptualisation) have accompanied the history of the concept from the very beginning – and are not likely to disappear any time soon – and some authors would rather dismiss it altogether, its core notion of defining security from the perspective of the individual has become widely accepted as a guiding line for international aid agencies.¹⁸

In particular, human security has also informed donor governments’ thinking about and conceptualising of the fragile states issue.¹⁹ The World Development Report (WDR) 2011 picked up on the very same idea, focussing on individual security as being the one central dimension that was found wanting in fragile states (World Bank 2011). Although the WDR avoided the contested term of *human* security, it introduced the hitherto uncommon term of “*citizen* security” into the debate and in fact defined it closely along the lines of a narrow understanding of “human security”.

17 The OSCE’s notion of comprehensive security was laid down in the 1996 “Lisbon Declaration on a Common and Comprehensive Security Model for Europe for the Twenty-First Century”. It refers back to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act with its three “baskets” of issues pertaining to security in Europe: politico-military aspects of security; “co-operation in the field of economics, of science and technology and of the environment”; and “co-operation in humanitarian and other fields”.

18 A small selection of critical and affirmative writings on human security includes Paris (2001); Owen (2004); Human Security Centre (2005); Kaldor / Martin / Selchow (2007).

19 Most references to human security in strategy papers on fragile states, however, are rather implicit. For an explicit reference, see BMZ (2007, 9). Boås / Jennings (2005) propose to base the very concept of state fragility on the concept of human security.

Yet, while human security has succeeded in bringing home forcefully the message that any talk about development is meaningless in the absence of basic human security, and that at the same time human security will always be at risk if fundamental elements of development are missing, the concept cannot solve one principal dilemma: When it comes to donor–recipient relations in development policy, *human* security and *national* security refer to different constituencies – citizens of recipient countries on the one hand, and citizens of donor states on the other. Catering to both at the same time with the same instruments is not impossible if circumstances are benign and the interests among several parties involved happen to coincide. But just as often, national security concerns can lead to conclusions that differ squarely from a pure development perspective on how concrete incidents of fragile statehood should be addressed. Providers of security in typical donor countries, for instance – such as the military, intelligence agencies, or the police – are organisations that historically have little in common with development agencies.²⁰ Thresholds of entry into – and exit from – engagement in fragile states usually differ, and so do indicators of success and the preparedness to condone unintended consequences of engagement, in particular with regard to human suffering among the local population.

Under such circumstances, it is not only programming at the individual recipient country level that is faced with serious challenges. Even formulating coherent *general* strategies to address fragile states is a difficult task if national self-interest and human security interests of populations in faraway countries are to be reconciled.

Additional problems arise when it comes to harmonising fragile-state strategies among several donor countries. Where national security interests are concerned, donor governments will be highly reluctant to give up – at least outside established security alliances – what they consider to be important discretionary room for manoeuvre if it is just for the sake of coordinated development strategies. In fact, even national strategy papers on fragile states often reflect the diverging preferences of the security and development establishments. Major critical issues, such as joint decision-making on resource allocation, significant investments in long-term preventive activities etc. are either left aside or papered over when documents reproduce common wisdom and general statements that are easy to agree upon.

From a pure development perspective, donor governments' primary interest in their own countries' security may be deplorable. On the other hand, it is a logical consequence of governments being tied to national constituencies that introduce their own preferences in the policy-making process (e.g. Moravcsik 1997). Those preferences, however, can change over time and begin to include long-term calculations as to the usefulness of human security for people living in faraway countries, and there are indications that such a process has been underway in such high-profile cases as Afghanistan.

Moreover, the aid-allocation literature has given rise to the interesting observation that donor countries that are themselves characterised by “better governance” tend to display a higher “commitment to development” in their actual policies than donors with not-so-good domestic governance (Faust 2008, 2011; Schudel 2010). There is some likelihood that the same logic may apply with regard to the development–security nexus. Higher

20 On the issue of the developmental-military interface, see Klingebiel / Roehder (2004).

responsiveness of the donor government to popular demand may actually be a useful feature for a better integration of national (“homeland”) security with the human security interests of foreign peoples.

4 The organisational challenge: Does strength lie in numbers?

Beyond the cognitive and political challenges described above, the task of implementing coherent development-oriented policies in fragile states is beset with a third challenge: the organisational fragmentation of the system of international aid agencies. The continuous growth of donor agencies during the last decades has caused serious problems of organisational proliferation (e.g. Acharya / Fuzzo de Lima / Moore 2006): Numerous multilateral, bilateral and non-state aid agencies are not only driven by their developmental objectives and the interests of their political principals; but as with every organisation, official donor agencies as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also interested in organisational survival and expansion.²¹ Accordingly, aid agencies also behave as agents of their own objectives, pursue special interests and often have little incentive to cooperate in order to harmonise their interventions. Instead, when competing for financial resources, each of them will attempt to demonstrate its unique contribution to effectively combating poverty and misery (Knack / Rahman 2007).

Not surprisingly, the contamination of the international aid industry by the aid agencies’ own bureaucratic interests has been a particular concern noted in several critiques of development assistance (e.g. Easterly 2002; Easterly 2008; Acharya / Fuzzo de Lima / Moore 2006; Gibson et al. 2005). In fact, the negative impact of bureaucratic interests on more coordinated and harmonised aid interventions in a highly diverse system of competing international aid agencies is considered a crucial obstacle to be overcome for improving aid effectiveness. Calls for disciplining aid agencies via increased harmonisation and alignment to recipient governments’ own strategic priorities have been particularly prominent in the Paris Agenda for Aid Effectiveness (High-Level Forum 2005). However, recent evaluations on the progress of harmonisation and alignment have been sobering (OECD 2011a) and case studies provide evidence on how bureaucratic resistance within aid agencies hampers better-harmonised and coordinated aid interventions (e.g. McCormick / Schmitz 2011; Winters 2012).

The obstacle of bureaucratic resistance is of even greater concern in the context of fragile states. Usually characterised by low levels of administrative capacity, weak coherence of government agencies and little domestic legitimacy, fragile states are almost by definition unable to align a multitude of donors along their own priorities. The idea of harmonising donors around local agendas, policy priorities and country-specific administrative procedures simply neglects the fact that, in fragile states, often no-one is truly empowered

21 From a principal-agent perspective (e.g. Martens et al. 2002; Gibson et al. 2005, 61–87; Faust 2011), aid agencies’ special interests are particularly problematic because they often have a massive information advantage over their principals – be they taxpayers or their representatives (parliaments) in donor countries or the intended beneficiaries in the developing world. Such a principal-agent perspective can also be extended to agencies that deal with both developmental and security issues, such as the European External Action Service (Furness 2013).

and able to negotiate and coordinate binding actions. Furthermore, state fragility causes additional reluctance by aid agencies to become aligned where the lack of effective and transparent administrative structures increases the fiduciary risks of external financial engagements. As a consequence, donors tend to resort to “second-best harmonisation”: a weak alignment role of the recipient government; huge political and organisational investments by the donor community; and parallel structures of decision-making and implementation.

In sum, aid workers, soldiers, police personnel and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives from numerous donor countries all scrimp in fragile states, ending up in games that involve many principals and far more agents. Turf fighting remains an essential activity on the ground, thus seriously hampering the effectiveness of external engagement (see UNDP 2006, 51). It is difficult to explain from a developmental perspective why there have been nine parallel pooled funds in the new state of South Sudan (OECD 2011a) or why, in post-disaster settings, the provision of financial resources is often accompanied by a massive inflow of uncoordinated NGOs, imposing huge transaction costs on the recipient administration. The competition for qualified local personnel among a multitude of aid agencies causes huge transaction costs on recipient states’ administrations. Another consequence of development cooperation in fragile states is the agencies’ necessity to buy out local competence, even if only for supportive tasks, in order to bring a planned project to a passable end. In the capital cities, aid programmes use ministries as human resource pools, thus causing a brain drain of scarce human capital away from the state apparatus. Accordingly, donor fragmentation negatively impacts on administrative quality and control of corruption – thus further diminishing one of the scarcest resources in fragile states (Knack / Rahman 2007; Djankov / Montalvo / Reynal-Querol 2009).

5 Conclusion

Given the three challenges of aid discussed, it is obvious that donor governments and development agencies have still a long way to go if the declared objectives of policy coherence and harmonised approaches are to be reached when dealing with fragile states.²² Conceptual ambiguities make it difficult to define the scope and characteristics of fragile statehood. Despite considerable progress on empirical data, research still lacks a convincing paradigm to account for state fragility and derive conclusions for prevention and treatment. At the same time, development agencies have to tackle the challenge that “development” is not the only name of the game and that, as a consequence, other actors bring in both competing interests (political challenge) and diverging routines (organisational challenge).

As fragile states are likely to remain a concern of development practitioners for many years to come, progress on the general agenda of improving aid effectiveness will not least depend on better aid delivery to countries suffering from state fragility. In light of the rather pessimistic outlook given in the above analysis, three considerations may offer

22 Donors have registered their general commitment to coherence, co-ordination and harmonisation in the 2005 Paris Declaration (see High-Level Forum 2005).

possible directions out of the impasse. First, more investment in knowledge is still likely to yield new insights and help overcome some of the starkest problems of conceptual ambiguity in the fragile states debate. Large-scale empirical research on the effects of external engagement in fragile states is still in its infancy. Given the dimension of the issue at stake and the volume of money devoted to military interventions in only a few singular cases, funds earmarked for sustained research and the dissemination of results are still more than modest.

Second, the high level of politicisation that comes along with the (national) security implications of the fragile states problem for donor governments must not necessarily be only a curse but may also be a blessing. If political pressure to address a particularly difficult problem increases, new opportunities may arise to break old deadlocks. It is a typical phenomenon of political decision-making that compromise between hardly reconcilable positions becomes possible if a real danger exists that the costs of having no solution at all will be immediately felt and exceed those of a painful compromise. Many of the important steps forward towards an agreed-upon international agenda for addressing state fragility have become possible in the immediate aftermath of severe crises, such as the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the deadlock over the Kosovo case in 1999, and 9/11. Making this agenda work better for development in the interest of those who suffer most, is the task ahead.

Third, complete harmonisation may in fact not even be desirable. While the immediate negative consequences of conceptual and strategic ambiguity among donors should be minimised to avoid unintentional but significant damage to those immediately affected by fragile statehood, a certain level of diversity – or even competition – concerning approaches and strategies is not the wrong thing to have. Thus, only through scientifically guided comparison can we arrive at reliable conclusions about which modes of intervention are more promising than others. Without diversity, such comparison cannot be drawn. Coordination, therefore, should not be understood as a means to prevent diversity but as a process to organise a deliberate division of labour, whereby “good practice” can first emerge before donors go about advocating it for harmonisation.

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