CRISE:

Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity

IN BRIEF

An operational definition of 'fragile states'

This *In Brief* aims to contribute to the operationalisation of the concept of 'fragile states' for use in development policy. Following a review of different definitions of 'fragile states', it proposes a three-pronged definition of fragility that broadly encompasses other classifications. Fragile states are defined as *states that are failing, or in danger of failing, with respect to authority, comprehensive socioeconomic entitlements or governance legitimacy.* We show that many states are fragile along one or two dimensions, but rather few are fragile along all three, despite causal connections among them—a lack of comprehensive data in the most fragile countries may partly account for this. A consideration of how fragility, as defined, relates to some other significant development approaches to vulnerable societies indicates that fragility in its various dimensions corresponds most closely to failures on particular Human Rights. Yet, the Human Rights approach applies to *all* countries and embodies a particular way of approaching development, whereas 'fragile' states form a specific subset of especially vulnerable countries and the concept as such does not imply a distinct approach to aid and development.

Definitions of state fragility

There is no uniformly accepted definition of state fragility, yet most definitions emphasise similar kinds of failures and vulnerabilities. Among agencies, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) both focus on service entitlement failures. DFID defines fragile states as those in which 'the government

cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor' (DFID, 2005), with core functions including service entitlements, justice and security. Canada's Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) project extends the definition beyond service entitlements to include states that 'lack the *functional authority* to provide basic security within their borders, the *institutional capacity* to provide basic social needs for their populations, and/or the *political legitimacy* to effectively represent their citizens at home or abroad' (CIFP, 2006). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), meanwhile, defines 'states in crisis' as those in which the 'central government does not exert significant control over its own territory or is unable or unwilling to assure the provision of vital services to significant parts of its territory where legitimacy of the government is weak or non-existent, and where violent conflict is a reality or a great risk' (USAID, 2005, p. 1). Finally, the World Bank compares fragile states with 'low-income countries under stress' (LICUS). Such states 'share a common fragility, in two particular respects': first, they have '[w]eak state policies and institutions: undermining the countries' capacity to deliver services to their citizens, control corruption, or provide for sufficient voice and accountability'; and second, they risk 'conflict and political instability' (World Bank, 2005, p. 1).

This *In Brief* proposes a broad approach that encompasses all of the above definitions (developed in Stewart and Brown, 2009). 'Fragility' applies to a country that is failing or at is at high risk of failing along three dimensions: authority failures; socioeconomic entitlement failures; and legitimacy failures.

- **Authority failures:** where the state lacks the authority to protect its citizens from violence of various kinds.
- **Socioeconomic entitlement failures:** where the state fails to ensure that all citizens have access to key services, such as basic education, energy and transport infrastructure, health services and water, as well as sufficient income to avoid destitution.
- **Legitimacy failures:** where the state lacks legitimacy, being undemocratic, often with the military ruling directly or strongly supporting and dominating the government, and enjoying only limited support among the people.

It is important to note that failures along all three dimensions can be due to deliberate action on the part of the government and its agencies, as well as to neglect or a lack of capacity.

Measuring state fragility

To investigate the relationships among the different dimensions of fragility and to make the definition useful for policy, an empirical interpretation of failure and the risk of failure in each dimension is required. This is clearly a somewhat arbitrary process and different conclusions may emerge with the application of different criteria. To operationalise the definition, we propose the following criteria:

Table 1 Provisional list of fragile states#

Country	Absolute entitlement	Progressive entitlement	Legitimate governance	State authority	Failures	Risks
Angola*	Failure	Failure	At risk	At risk	2	2
Congo, Democratic Republic of*	Failure	At risk		Failure	2	1
Equatorial Guinea*	Failure	Failure	At risk		2	1
Sierra Leone*	Failure	Failure		At risk	2	1
Saudi Arabia		Failure	Failure		2	0
Mali	Failure	Failure			2	0
Burkina Faso	Failure	Failure			2	0
Niger*	Failure	Failure			2	0
Burundi*	Failure			Failure	2	0
Myanmar*	N/A	N/A	Failure	Failure	2	0
Iraq*	N/A	N/A	Failure	Failure	2	0
Côte d'Ivoire*	At risk	At risk	N/A	Failure	1	2
Ethiopia*	At risk	Failure		At risk	1	2
Rwanda*	Failure		At risk	At risk	1	2
Swaziland	At risk	At risk	Failure		1	2
Nigeria*	Failure	At risk		At risk	1	2
Algeria			At risk	Failure	1	1
Oman		At risk	Failure		1	1
Central African Republic*	Failure			At risk	1	1
Libya		At risk	Failure		1	1
Nepal*			At risk	Failure	1	1
Guinea-Bissau*	Failure	At risk			1	1
Liberia*	Failure			At risk	1	1
United Arab Emirates		At risk	Failure		1	1
Chad*	Failure	At risk			1	1
Uzbekistan*			Failure		1	0
Bahrain			Failure		1	0
Belarus			Failure		1	0
Bhutan			Failure		1	0
Syria			Failure		1	0
Somalia*	N/A	N/A		Failure	1	0
Vietnam			Failure		1	0
Russia				Failure	1	0
Azerbaijan			Failure		1	0
Turkmenistan			Failure		1	0
Qatar			Failure		1	0
Israel				Failure	1	0
India				Failure	1	0
Kuwait			Failure		1	0
China			Failure		1	0
Laos*			Failure		1	0
Cuba	N/A	N/A	Failure		1	0
Zimbabwe*			Failure		1	0
Afghanistan*	N/A	N/A	N/A	Failure	1	0
Eritrea*			Failure		1	0
Korea, North	N/A	N/A	Failure		1	0
Philippines				Failure	1	0

Based on data for 2000–04. Table does not include 31 countries that are at risk in at least one dimension but do not fail in any. For the full list, see Stewart and Brown (2009).

* Indicates countries that are included on the OECD Development Assistance Committee's list of fragile and conflict-affected states in 2000–07.

- **Authority failure:** drawing on the dataset of the Centre for Systemic Peace (Marshall, 2006), we define authority failure as ethnic or civil war in the current period; and risk of failure as ethnic or civil violence (involving a lower level of violence than civil war) in the current period or previous two years, or ethnic or civil war in the previous four years, but not in the current year.

- **Socioeconomic entitlement failure:** our definition of absolute failure applies to countries that fall two standard deviations or more below the mean performance level of all countries with incomes at or below $1,500 in 2000, for a variety of social outcomes, including child mortality, provision of clean water and primary school enrolment. Risk of failure pertains to countries that fall between one and two standard deviations below the average. We also include *progressive failure* in this dimension, which provides a lower standard for failure or risk of failure at lower income levels.

- **Legitimacy failure:** to establish a broad index of legitimate governance failures, we use the Polity IV overall indicator of democratic governance, ranging between minus 10 (least democratic) and plus 10 (most democratic). We utilise simple cut-off points of -6 for failure and 0 for risk of failure, in the legitimacy dimension.

Empirical application of the three-fold definition reveals 13 countries failing and 15 at risk in the authority dimension, 8 failing and 17 at risk in the (progressive) socioeconomic entitlement dimension, and 23 failing and 18 at risk in the legitimacy dimension. Table 1 lists all those countries that fail in at least one dimension (based on data for 2000–04). However, these estimates are illustrative, and the data and thresholds could be open to question.

Connections between the three dimensions of fragility

Much empirical research has indicated multiple causal connections among the three dimensions. Most importantly:

- *authority failures are associated with entitlement failures, since conflict tends to undermine both public goods delivery and access and private incomes;*

- *authority failures are associated with legitimacy failures since conflict is linked to a loss of civil and political rights;*

- *suppression of civil and political rights (loss of legitimacy) can lead to a loss of authority and conflict, but not invariably;* and

- *socioeconomic entitlement failures, especially where exclusionary and associated with horizontal inequalities, are a cause of conflict and result in a loss of authority.*

Despite the reasons to expect strong relationships, empirical research shows many countries that fail or are at risk of failure do so in one or two dimensions, not in all three, as shown in Table 1.

Statistically, there are only limited correlations across the dimensions. Socioeconomic entitlement failures, both absolute and progressive, are positively correlated with authority failures, although, of course, this does not establish the direction of causality. The correlation between legitimacy failures and socioeconomic entitlements failures is positive but low. Perhaps surprisingly, a significant, negative correlation appears between legitimacy failure and authority failure, which may be symptomatic of the finding that conflict is less likely in authoritarian states and consolidated democracies, while transition democracies are the most vulnerable to conflict (see, for example, Hegre et al., 2001).

Relationship between fragility, as defined, and other approaches to development

The relationship between the three-fold definition of fragility and other major approaches to development is summarised in Table 2.

The definition of fragility adopted here most closely relates to a Human Rights approach, with *authority* corresponding to the security of persons, *socioeconomic entitlements* corresponding to Economic and Social Rights, and *legitimacy* corresponding to Political and Civil rights. However, a fragile states approach focuses particularly on gross

Table 2 Conceptual relationship between the three-fold definition and other major approaches to development

Major development strategy	Relationship between major development strategy and the three dimensions of fragility		
	Authority	Socioeconomic entitlements	Legitimate governance
Human Rights	Authority failures imply failures with respect to the 'security of persons'	Failures with regard to economic and social rights (and discrimination in their distribution) imply entitlement failures and vice versa	Civil and political rights failures imply a lack of legitimacy and, generally, vice versa
Social exclusion	Contingent	Significant social exclusion implies entitlement failure; fragility may occur without significant social exclusion	Significant social exclusion implies a lack of legitimacy, particularly in cases where it includes political exclusion
Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)	Contingent	Failures in relation to the MDGs imply entitlement failures, but the latter may still occur even if MDGs are realised	Not relevant

human rights failures, whereas a Human Rights approach goes well beyond this, considering how every country performs. The Human Rights approach also looks at development through a particular lens, underscoring agency and empowerment, puts especial emphasis on the law as a process, and is often used as an advocacy tool, which is not necessarily the case in the analysis of fragile states. Social exclusion forms part of both the socioeconomic entitlements dimension (since socioeconomic entitlements must be non-exclusionary) and the legitimacy dimension (which also requires non-discrimination). Finally, the socio-economic entitlements dimension encompasses and goes beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and poverty reduction approaches to development.

Policy implications

The objective of public policy towards fragile states is to help them move away from fragility. This involves moving to a situation in which government authority extends throughout the state's jurisdiction, the government respects human rights and has political legitimacy, and it is willing and able to meet basic human needs in an inclusive way. What this means for public action in practice, though, will vary hugely depending on the source of the fragility and the nature of the state. Furthermore, there is a general issue about which type of fragility to prioritise when a state is failing in two or three dimensions. The strong linkages between the authority and socioeconomic entitlement dimensions, however, suggest that both of these dimensions should generally be given priority.

The precise policies to be followed need to be differentiated according to the source of the fragility in the state in question:

- **Weaknesses in authority.** A lack of authority represents a very basic state failure and one that makes it difficult, indeed often impossible, to overcome other types of fragility. There are occasions when the international community itself (under the auspices of the United Nations, regional organisations, coalitions of countries or bilateral arrangements) can use force to impose authority, although this is frequently unsuccessful, provoking opposition or leading to long-term dependency. Generally, a more desirable alternative is to encourage and facilitate local peace processes and then to provide support (including military assistance, if needed) to any agreed and legitimate government.

- **Socioeconomic entitlement failures including horizontal inequalities.** Aid and policy dialogue can contribute to reducing such failures, especially where aid accounts for a substantial proportion of gross domestic product.

It is essential that horizontal inequalities are explicitly considered, measured and addressed. To be effective in tackling entitlement failures, policy needs to be directed at the main source(s) of the problem, whether revenue deficiency or poor allocation of resources, for example, or limited productive opportunities for the population.

- **Legitimacy.** This requires institutional change, towards inclusive democratic systems with broad respect for political and civil human rights. Yet there can be trade-offs in this area. A premature transition to democracy under external pressure can provoke exclusionary policies and suppression of human rights, while in peace-making contexts, insistence on pursuing justice and supporting some human rights, including criminal investigations of major violators, can make it more difficult to reach a peace agreement.

A major problem is that frequently the government itself may be responsible for these failures, which are the intentional consequence of government policy. In this context, a Human Rights approach may be helpful, especially in situations where a government has agreed to the international Human Rights conventions. Significant obstacles to the reversal of fragility also include entrenched political interests, excessive military or police autonomy, and high levels of corruption.

—**Frances Stewart and Graham Brown**

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