Rethinking Engagement in Fragile States

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A Report of the CSIS Africa Program

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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July 2015

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Introduction

The concept of "fragile states" has been the subject of an expanding body of scholarly literature and the target of considerable bilateral and multilateral intervention and assistance. The concept gained traction in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as policymakers looked toward what were termed "ungoverned" or "under-governed" regions as potential incubators and havens for violent extremism and terror networks. The reasons for attention have broadened over time. Instability in fragile states is a frequent source of conflict and humanitarian crisis within countries, a driver of displacement and massive refugee flows, and often a threat to the stability and security of neighboring states. Economies in fragile states often underperform, their societies are divided, and their people suffer poor developmental and economic outcomes. Fragile states are home to nearly half the world's population living in absolute poverty.[1]

These problems demand a response from the international donor community, and indeed they have been a big focus of foreign policy attention, diplomatic effort, security interventions, and development dollars. The results of these efforts, however, have been decidedly mixed. Part of the problem is that diagnosing "fragility" in a particular context can be difficult, and the diversity and peculiarities of states deemed fragile means that there can be no easy template of responses to help guide interventions and translate "lessons learned" from one context to another. Donors often lack sufficient understanding of the fragile states in which they work; as a result, they have focused on the manifestations of fragility rather than the structural vulnerabilities that drive fragility, which are shaped by history, geography, culture, and power dynamics that are more difficult to capture in indices and quantitative analyses.

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[1] Forty-three percent, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition of fragile states, which is a composite of the lists produced by the World Bank, African Development Bank, and Asian Development Bank. See OECD, *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions* (Paris: OECD, 2015), 21, http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/development/states-of-fragility-2015_9789264227699-en#page23; World Bank, "Harmonized List of Fragile Situations FY14," http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTLICUS/Resources/511777-1269623894864/HarmonizedlistoffragilestatesFY14.pdf; and Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2015* (Washington, DC: Fund for Peace, 2015), http://library.fundforpeace.org/library/fragilestatesindex-2015.pdf. Absolute poverty was defined by the United Nations in 1995 as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services."

The tendency has been to focus on the formal institutions and processes of the state—constitutions, elections, technical capacity, tasks that lend themselves more easily to metrics, and to the tools of analysis and intervention most readily available to donors. Much more difficult to get at are the political economy dynamics and the social divisions that almost always accompany state fragility and are often the reason for state weakness. Finally, there can be no technical fixes to fragile states, and forging a social compact, a collective sense of nationhood, and resilient institutions is the work of many generations, and a process in which external players can only play a small part. Donor states need to be realistic about what they can achieve in "state-building" efforts and be clear-eyed in their priorities and long-term commitment to addressing fragility.

In the last year, CSIS has held a series of workshops and public meetings examining the challenges of fragility in four states categorized as fragile: Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, and South Sudan. The aim was to examine each of these cases individually, and to better understand the opportunities—and limitations—of external intervention. Despite the diversity of these countries, common themes and recommendations for external engagement emerged across the discussions:

- Diversify partners beyond central government institutions

- Better map and understand informal structures of authority and interaction

- Increase emphasis on and strengthen social cohesion

- Encourage a "venture capital" approach to interventions

- Start gradually and scale up; not the reverse

Conceptual Challenges

The problems of dealing with state fragility begin at the conceptual stage, and the categorization of fragile states raises some questions about its utility as an analytical framework. There is little consensus on what is meant by state fragility, and competing definitions cover an extremely broad set of indicators and states. These four definitions, from institutions and individuals working on fragile states, illustrate the lack of consensus:

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has moved away from the "fragile state" nomenclature to focusing on "states of fragility." Its 2015 report on the subject describes five dimensions for measuring fragility: violence; access to justice for all; effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions; economic foundations; and capacity to adapt to social, economic, and environmental shocks and disasters.[2]

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[2] OECD, *States of Fragility 2015*.

The African Development Bank likewise describes "situations of fragility" and opts for a more straightforward definition, describing fragility as: "A condition of elevated risk of institutional breakdown, societal collapse or violent conflict."[3]

For the International Monetary Fund, fragile states are "states in which the government is unable to deliver basic services and security to the population."[4]

Political scientist Seth Kaplan adds the important dimension of social cohesion/fragmentation to the mix: "A state's ability to navigate its challenges is chiefly determined by two factors: the capacity of its population to cooperate and the ability of its institutions (formal and informal) to channel this cooperation to meet national challenges. . . . Fragile states are deficient in both areas."[5]

Partly because of the lack of consensus on definitions, diagnosing fragile states is difficult. It is hard to separate out genuine fragility from moments of fragility. And it is likewise difficult to distinguish root causes of fragility from drivers or manifestations of fragility. These problems make it difficult to agree on which states are fragile and anticipate which ones are likely to become fragile. The various indices of state fragility produced by institutions such as the Fund for Peace and World Bank have merit as analytic exercises, but they agree on little and have limited predictive value.[6] The data they use offer some clues but do not capture important ways of measuring stability in a state, such as the degree of social cohesion and the nature of intergroup grievances. This would require the use of qualitative data that is not factored into these indices. It is hard to derive much meaning from the 2015 Fragile States Survey when it places such a diverse set of states as Russia, Tanzania, and Angola in a single category (High Warning) and equally difficult to distinguish between categories such as 'Alert,' 'High Alert,' and 'Very High Alert.' The OECD report puts Angola and Liberia in the same basket. Ethiopia and Somalia are paired in another (a grouping to which both countries would likely take offense).

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that state fragility is something of a catch-all category for countries that have little in common other than being troubled. The case studies examined in this report illustrate this diversity. South Sudan, a country in which there is little sense of shared nationhood and where state institutions are barely nascent, collapsed into civil war almost immediately after achieving independence. Somalia is fragmented into autonomous or semiautonomous statelets whose people are

[3] African Development Bank, *Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa: The African Development Bank Group Strategy 2014–2019* (Abidjan: African Development Bank, June 2014), i, http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Policy-Documents/Addressing_Fragility_and_Building_Resilience_in_Africa-_The_AfDB_Group_Strategy_2014%E2%80%932019.pdf.
[4] International Monetary Fund (IMF) African Department, *Building Resilience in Fragile States in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2015), http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/dp/2015/afr1505.pdf.
[5] Seth Kaplan, "Identifying Truly Fragile States," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 52, https://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/twq.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Kaplan_PDF.pdf.
[6] See, for example, Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2015*; and World Bank, "Harmonized List of Fragile Situations FY14."

homogenous in terms of ethnicity and religion but nonetheless deeply divided, with wildly divergent views about the type of state they want to live under. Mali is a weak state with limited ability to provide public goods—including security—to its people, but at the same time a place where there is a fairly strong sense of national identity shared by most groups, apart from an aggrieved minority, the Tuareg. Myanmar is a fairly strong, authoritarian state undergoing an uncertain, incomplete political transition while continuing to oppress groups it does not recognize as its own citizens.

From Muddled Concepts to Muddled Policy

Given these conceptual problems it is not surprising that donors have struggled to come up with effective solutions to fragile states. Among the biggest oversights has been to underplay the importance of the political economy. Fragility is not a purely technical problem that can be fixed by applying procedural solutions such as passing new constitutions, improving tax collection, and reforming public financial management. It usually involves political and societal deficiencies in the way people are governed, how they relate to each other, and how they understand their roles and responsibilities within the nation state.

In addition, fragile states tend not to operate in the way that donor governments are familiar with. Authority is often exercised outside formal institutions but donor governments are not used to thinking in this way and find it uncomfortable to engage with informal economies, power structures, and networks. Recipient states may also strongly object to external governments or NGOs bypassing the central authorities, thus limiting the scope of movement and interaction. As a result, donors, usually under intense pressure to respond quickly, will often have a limited understanding of the societies in which they work, which can lead to misdiagnosing their problems, choosing the wrong partners, and implementing programs that have little or no positive impact.

In order to avoid these problems, donor governments must make more effort to understand the countries they work in, over a longer period of time. Reactive analysis that takes place in a hurry, usually in the middle of a crisis, is less useful than a more considered approach. Embassies should be doing this mapping exercise in a more systematic way, reaching beyond the circuit of political elites and urban-based civil society groups to talk to a far broader set of interlocutors and analysts. Government officials and elites in the capital city can only provide a partial picture and are often disconnected from what is happening in the wider country. There are many examples of donor nations failing to discern the direction of events because of their reliance on a small circle of informants or their failure to make long-term investments in understanding their host countries. The United States and its European partners were reluctant to abandon the notion that Mali was a model democracy in a region where there were few other success stories to hold on to. The 2012 coup d'état caught them off-guard. In South Sudan, donors appeared almost willfully blind to the rapid degeneration

of the country in the aftermath of independence, unable to confront the failures of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) as a partner and unwilling to change direction as their development money continued to be wasted. In Somalia, the United States disengaged for more than a decade following the Black Hawk Down debacle of 1993. When it returned, it was too quick to pounce on the threat posed by the Islamic Courts Union (thanks in part to poor advice from its self-interested ally, Ethiopia) rather than credit its progress in forging the beginnings of a social contract with communities in Mogadishu.

One area that deserves more attention from donors is the need to cement horizontal links between self-identifying groups in society—whether ethnic, religious, regional, cultural, or socioeconomic—and strengthen their sense of collective nationhood. In many fragile states, population groups are highly fragmented and people lack a strong sense of national identity. Citizens need to want to live in the same state together, yet most donor efforts focus on building the social contract between the government and its people rather than the social contract between citizens.

Finally, current approaches to fragility tend to focus on the central state—in places where a major problem is often the over-centralization of state power. People living in peripheral regions often view the central government with deep suspicion, and these suspicions can quickly extend to donors if they are perceived as working too closely with authorities at the national level. Further, by limiting their interlocutors to a small set of government players, often with an overreliance on particular individuals deemed trustworthy, donors lose leverage and partner governments lose incentive for inclusivity or reform. Donors need to look below the national level, particularly in countries where the central government lacks legitimacy among sections of the public. International efforts in Somalia have been dogged for years by perceptions that they have narrowly focused on national transitional governments that have had little public legitimacy, questionable authority, and limited territorial control. By contrast, donors are sometimes slow to identify subnational governance and peace-building initiatives that are working and even slower to support them. In Somalia, the U.S. government tried to correct this oversight by adopting a twin-track approach, diversifying its support toward some of the most promising federal entities such as Somaliland and Puntland. But this approach soon faltered, and the Transitional Federal Government maintained its perceived status as "the only game in town" with a guaranteed flow of foreign funding.

In summary, donor engagement with fragile states must be broader, involving deep analysis conducted over a longer period of time and engaging with a wider set of stakeholders in the informal and the subnational arenas as well as the formal, national levels.

Case Studies

During the winter of 2014–15, CSIS analyzed four cases of state fragility in a series of interactive meetings with country experts and policymakers. The following case studies illustrate how fragility has different causes, symptoms, and solutions. If these countries do share a single common feature it is in the difficulties donors have faced in trying to assist them.

Somalia: Repeating the Same Mistakes

The international community has been closely engaged in Somalia in recent years—indeed the field of partners has broadened out—but it has largely failed to learn the lessons of previous encounters. It has been drawn to formal, national-level solutions centered on the political elite in a country where people have a strong antipathy to a centralized state and where the most successful approaches have been informal, locally based efforts that cross clan lines.

The Somali Compact, agreed between the new Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its international backers in 2013, marked a new phase of donor effort in a country that has long suffered from periods of intense international activity followed by extended spells of disengagement. The public confidence placed in the new political administration of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was partly based on his reputation as an individual of personal probity untainted by the warlord politics of the past, and the process by which he was chosen, which although imperfect, was at least Somali-driven. Confidence was enhanced by security improvements in the country, where an African Union peacekeeping force, partly financed and trained by the United States and European Union, had made steady gains against the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, which lost control of large sections of territory, including the capital Mogadishu.

The situation began to deteriorate almost immediately. This was due, in large part, to the shortcomings of the FGS, which shared the same weaknesses for venality and infighting as previous transitional governments. However, Somalia's international supporters did not help either. They pressured the FGS to forgo its 'Six Pillar' strategy that concentrated on delivering public goods to its people in favor of a three-pronged, procedural task list to pass a permanent constitution, enact electoral legislation, and hold elections, all within strict deadlines. This approach was driven by the understandable desire to push for results, bring Somalia's "perpetual transition"[7] to an end, and prevent donor funds from being wasted. By doing so, however, it forced Somalis to focus on the very issues that drove them apart, triggering arguments about the governance framework for the nation and hastening a political crisis over how to resolve the status of the growing number of largely autonomous federal member states. It also increased the chances of

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[7] Matt Bryden, *Somalia Redux? Assessing the New Somali Federal Government* (Washington, DC: CSIS, August 2013), 7, http://csis.org/files/publication/130819_Bryden_SomaliaRedux_WEB.pdf.

failure because it quickly became apparent that the 2016 deadline for the completion of these tasks was wholly unrealistic. Meanwhile, counterterrorism remained at the forefront of the international agenda. While U.S. missile strikes against Al-Shabaab succeeded in removing senior militants from the battlefield they did little to inspire the state building effort because the FGS and the nascent Somali Armed Forces lacked the capacity to control and govern newly-liberated areas. This state of affairs raises the specter of Somalia further fragmenting as Al-Shabaab's decline leaves a vacuum that clan-based militia, rather than government forces, exploit.

Mali: Keeping Up the Pressure

The way in which Mali unraveled in 2012 highlighted the shortcomings of analysis on fragile states. In the 2012 Fragile States Index, Mali was ranked the 79th most 'at-risk' state, performing better than Israel, India, and Indonesia and scoring surprisingly well in the category for state legitimacy.[8] Subsequent events showed this to be a serious misreading of the situation. Months later, the country collapsed when Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists who had hijacked a Tuareg separatist uprising seized control of two-thirds of the territory. The military's inept response to this threat provoked a coup d'état that ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré just weeks before the end of his term in office.

The international community was taken aback by these developments. Its view of Mali as a burgeoning democracy in an unstable region meant it was blind to the signs of growing domestic frustration at poor governance, corruption, organized crime, and impunity. Later, as it tried to assist the country following a successful French military operation against the insurgents, donors failed to confront the structural drivers of the country's fragility. It gave insufficient attention to the use of corruption and kickbacks as a governance tool by members of the ruling elite in Bamako to buy the loyalty of local authorities and criminal groups in the north. Nor did it adequately unpick the complex, overlapping relationships between political and tribal elites, Tuareg separatists, Islamist insurgents, and narco-traffickers. Rather than trying to better understand and neutralize the power dynamics that drove poor governance in Mali, the United States focused on restoring civilian rule and holding elections so that a legal bar on the kinds of security and development assistance it could offer would be lifted. The rush to reinstall a democratically elected government and combat terrorism has led the international community to dodge the root causes of fragility in Mali: injustice, poor governance, corruption, organized crime, the political and socioeconomic marginalization of minority groups, and the incomplete task of Security Sector Reform.

Mali's long process to negotiate an end to its conflict through the Algiers mediation process demonstrated the disruptive power of spoilers. The June 20 peace agreement signed by the leader of the main separatist group will remain tenuous for some time. The

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[8] Fund for Peace, "The Failed States Index 2012" [sortable rankings], http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2012-sortable.

category of spoilers is a broad one; it includes splinter groups from the Coordination of Movements for Azawad (CMA) who have decried the government's failure to grant full autonomy; the Islamists and drug traffickers who played no part in the negotiations; and members of the government who used allied militia such as the Gatia to keep the pressure on the CMA in the north and offer a security presence that its own military was incapable of providing. History is another obstacle in the way of peace. Mali's government has a record of failing to deliver on peace agreements and the many promises embedded in the current agreement may be beyond the capacity of the government to deliver, even if it sustains the political commitment to do so, which itself is a major uncertainty.

Successive rebellions of Tuareg groups are in part the result of well-founded grievances, but these groups cannot claim to speak for Mali, or even for the north, where they comprise only 15 percent of the population. Further the Tuareg have a long history of inter-clan conflict and competition over trade and smuggling routes and water access, and even within clans there are power struggles over leadership. Bridging divides between the north and south in Mali will be a long-term undertaking, but bridging divides within the north and coming to agreement on structures of authority and provision of security will be equally difficult. By force of arms, one minority group—and a fractured one at that—will have disproportionate influence on how the decisions are made.

The international community faces the challenge of navigating this complex history, acting in an even-handed manner, trying to understand the motivations and agendas of overlapping groups, coming up with ways to marginalize the spoilers, and considering robust ways to monitor and enforce the peace agreement, all within a context of weak state authority. These efforts will have little chance of success unless matched by a serious attempt to tackle the structural weaknesses of the state, including the criminal economy, clientelist politics, and the lack of legitimate livelihood opportunities in parts of the country.

South Sudan: Unripe for Engagement

The case of South Sudan offers further support to the thesis that liberation movements make bad civilian governments. The idea that the SPLM would transform at independence from an armed guerilla group into a democratic, broad-based party of government was always fanciful. Instead, it quickly descended into a fragmented, ill-disciplined organization whose leaders devoted their efforts to fighting each other for political control and economic resources rather than attempting to govern their citizens. When these squabbles spilled into violence in December 2013, the fighting quickly took on ethnic overtones. While the civil war that continues to engulf large parts of the country covers multiple, overlapping local conflicts and regional spillovers, at the

national level it boils down to a fight for supremacy between President Salva Kiir and the man he fired as vice president in the summer of 2013, Riek Machar.

This conflict unfolded under the eyes of the international community, including a UN mission with an explicit state-building mandate. The United States—with support from other nations—provided moral and material assistance to the SPLM during its long liberation struggle, prepared the ground for the negotiations that ended its war with Sudan, and worked closely with South Sudan through a transitional period that eventually resulted in independence in 2011. None of these efforts could save the country from collapsing almost immediately. All the crucial ingredients for nation building were absent. South Sudanese lacked a strong sense of national identity beyond the pre-independence desire to rid themselves of the government in Khartoum. The country's leadership made no effort to present a national vision, forge unity, channel the country's natural resource wealth toward development, or build the institutions that make up a functioning nation state. In particular, no serious effort was made to engage in Security Sector Reform and instill professionalism among its unruly, oversized, and ethnically-divided army, the SPLA. Meanwhile, the SPLM consolidated political power, terrorized its opponents, and clamped down on the country's nascent civil society. Donors paid insufficient attention to the political economy of the country and were slow to criticize the SPLM. Instead, they seemed content to backstop the government, performing service delivery functions the South Sudanese should have been doing themselves.

The war, in its current phase, offers few opportunities for useful intervention other than tending to populations suffering a devastating humanitarian crisis that is likely to worsen over time. The mediation effort by South Sudan's neighbors from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is weak, divided, and undermined by direct interference in the conflict by Uganda and Sudan. The broader international community has been insufficiently engaged and has limited levers of influence to bear. The main protagonists, meanwhile, have dragged their feet over the negotiations and appear to believe they can win on the battlefield. Ceasefire agreements have been broken almost immediately and neither leader is capable of controlling the multiple armed groups that nominally claim to be fighting for them. Ordinary South Sudanese citizens have been cut out of the process and their repeated calls for accountability for abuses carried out during the war look likely to be ignored, as in previous cycles of conflict.

For all these reasons, this is not a conflict ripe for transition from violence to stabilization. Both sides think they can win and see violence as the best means for achieving their goals; neither side can control its combatants and loosely aligned forces; external neighbors continue to meddle; and the current mediation architecture has failed.

Myanmar: Navigating the Transition[9]

Myanmar does not fit neatly into the definition of a fragile state. At independence in 1947, its leaders inherited a governing system from the British, who created a strong colonial center in Yangon but exercised little control over the rest of the country. The state was built around a strong military core, which delivered services to citizens in areas where the ethnic majority Burman live, but had little authority in areas where ethnic minority groups—which make up approximately 40 percent of the population—reside. The periphery of Myanmar has experienced armed conflicts between ethnic rebels and government troops for decades. As a consequence, these areas are plagued by underdevelopment, illicit economies, weak rule of law, rampant trafficking, and transnational crime. The government essentially relied on militias aligned with the military to maintain order in many remote areas.

Outside the military, bureaucratic capacity has deteriorated over the years as a result of internal mismanagement, underinvestment, and international isolation. This weakness was illustrated in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, when authorities were unable to either account for the cyclone's damage or effectively assist victims. A large and well-endowed country, Myanmar had gone from one of the wealthiest to one of the least-developed countries in Asia by the time the government announced its opening up in 2011.

Myanmar's ethnic diversity has been a source of communal conflict throughout the country's modern history. There are more than 120 ethnic groups in Myanmar; Buddhism is widely practiced among the ethnic majority Burman, while Christianity and Islam are often practiced by other ethnic groups. This diversity, set against decades-long conflicts, has divided society on ethno-religious lines and fueled mistrust between different identity groups.

Since taking office in 2011, the quasi-civilian government of President Thein Sein has implemented political and economic reforms, and granted limited freedom of speech and expression. Financial and administrative reforms have been taking place gradually and the economy has rebounded, growing over 7 percent in the past two years. The government is trying to negotiate a nationwide ceasefire deal with 16 ethnic armies, but resolving the thorny issues of power and revenue-sharing are proving very difficult, and fighting continues in parts of northern Myanmar.

Meanwhile, the ethno-religious divide has shown no signs of abating, especially with regards to the treatment of the stateless Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar. While these problems remain unresolved, attention has turned in the past year to the national

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[9] With many thanks to Phuong Nguyen, research associate with the CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies, for authorship of this country brief.

elections due to take place in November 2015. The elections are considered a critical test of Myanmar's political reform process.

Since the normalization of U.S.-Myanmar relations in 2012, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has returned to Myanmar, where it provides humanitarian assistance, elections and governance assistance, and promotes political and interreligious dialogue. USAID has allocated $18.6 million to help political parties develop and $1.4 million for humanitarian assistance in Rakhine state. The Departments of State and Defense have launched a human rights dialogue with the Myanmar government, and the U.S. military has begun to provide limited training to its Burmese counterparts on the rule of law and civil-military relations. Nonetheless, some members of Congress, along with human rights organizations, believe that the United States should not engage militarily with Myanmar until its armed forces at least submit to civilian control and take steps to improve their poor human rights record.

Myanmar's political opening has prompted a flood of sovereign donors and international NGOs into the country. These organizations have launched projects in various areas, often with little coordination among each other. The government's bureaucracy and support infrastructure has limited capacity to absorb this assistance. State-level governments are particularly weak, whereas ethnic- and community-based organizations, which often bear the primary responsibility of assisting and delivering services to local populations, do not always have adequate resources to fulfill their roles. Most socioeconomic and administrative reform efforts will need to be implemented at the state and regional levels. In the past, attempts to reform Myanmar's bureaucracy have never extended to the country's periphery.

If the inherent and longstanding lack of trust between Myanmar's majority and minority stakeholders cannot be addressed or at least mitigated, the country may never escape a vicious cycle of conflict and violence. An important and likely longer-term goal for the United States and other international partners of Myanmar should be to help build a system that can mitigate communal friction and deliver economic dividends to peripheral regions.

While the near-term priority of the United States will be to support the November election process, it will need to prepare for a long, bumpy reform process.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Fragile states defy simple categorization and there is no rulebook on how to fix them. Evidence from around the world suggests that donors find it hard to assist fragile states in useful ways. When programs are successful, they are often not sustained in the long run. What works in one place does not necessarily work in another. These hazards preclude making a set of general recommendations. They do, however, suggest that fresh thinking is required. These efforts should not be straightjacketed by unhelpful attempts

to categorize fragile states into a group toward which a common set of activities can be directed.

Some priority areas for fresh thinking:

1. *Diversify partners.* A better balance needs to be struck between building national and subnational capacities, including regional, state, or even municipal authorities, strengthening the social compact at the local level, building incentives and confidence, and giving local authorities and communities a greater stake in the success of national reconstruction efforts.

2. *Understand informal structures of authority and interaction.* Donors need a far better understanding of the societies in which they work. Where governments are weak, a failure to understand power relations outside formal structures is to miss what actually makes a society or state function. Interventions that do not take these relations into account can exacerbate conflict, potentially disrupt sources of resilience or coping, and distort incentives for cooperation by central and subnational players. More effort and more resources are required to map informal centers of influence and mechanisms of governance; analyze informal economies and markets; understand actors and dynamics within subnational groups; and identify sources of resilience and examples of positive deviance.

3. *Build social cohesion.* What is missing in most states deemed fragile—and what often keeps their government weak—is a sense of nationhood, or at the very least a feeling by different communities of citizens that they share a collective identity or at least a sense of interdependence and a stake in a national entity. How do donors encourage people in a fragile state to overcome their differences? It is difficult; this must be an organic, long-term process driven primarily by forces and interactions within a given society; it entails moving beyond narratives and perceptions that have often been shaped over centuries. It is one in which external players can play at best a peripheral role. But there may be ways to encourage and support social cohesion around the idea of shared nationhood. Symbols are important; they may range from flags and anthems to national narratives and shared histories. Also important are the influence of individuals who transcend subnational fractures. Cultural ambassadors can be helpful, whether sports stars, teams, musicians, or respected elders. Business ambassadors can help bridge divides; so too can religious leaders who promote interreligious dialogue and respectful relations between the faiths and communities. Education can play an important role in building collective memory and commonality, although in most fragile states, building education systems and educational access will be a very long-term endeavor. Finally, as donors, governments, and multilateral institutions invest in development and economic growth, they should consider placing particular emphasis on business and infrastructure projects that build market linkages, promote economic

interdependence among disparate communities, and give each a stake in the success of the other.

4. *Take risks.* A risk-taking attitude should bind together external efforts to intervene in cases of state fragility. Donors do not necessarily need to increase the resources they deploy but they should consider spreading them more widely inside the host country, testing what works in different settings, with different communities. A more entrepreneurial, venture capitalist approach is needed, with further investment in those areas that show progress, with the aim of incentivizing success rather than overdependence.

5. *Start small and scale up; not the reverse.* The typical pattern in external interventions in fragile states is that a crisis precipitates a major influx of resources and initiatives, with little time for country analysis, with coordination orchestrated on the fly, and little considered agreement on priorities or agendas. This is often followed by a scaling down of both attention and resources, as the immediate crisis passes and when "benchmarks for progress," often an election, are reached. The pattern is understandable: during a crisis there is practical need and pressure for stabilization, for quick wins and for metrics, and a crisis may be a one-time opportunity to get policymakers and legislatures to give attention and resources. But this pattern means that a massive influx of money and programs comes at precisely the time that a state's absorptive capacity and attention span is low; it brings with it a huge potential for waste and leakage; and in a politically fluid situation it has the potential to skew incentives for cooperation, reconciliation, and performance. Far better is for donors to scale up modest amounts of resources over a long-term period in timely, predictable ways, than overwhelm host governments by flooding them with resources they are ill-equipped to deploy wisely. This would lead to a gradual scaling up as interventions gain traction, as absorptive capacity builds, and as there is better understanding of what may be effective.

Dilemmas to Confront

Finally, donors must manage a number of dilemmas in their engagement with fragile states. First is the need to balance demands from the host country (and the donors' domestic taxpayers) for short-term outputs while confronting the reality that helping states emerge from situations of fragility requires long-term engagement with a high likelihood of setbacks and failures. Donors must help improve the capacity of states to deliver meaningful improvements to the lives of their citizens; only then will the state become more legitimate. A process-driven approach that focuses on holding elections and passing legislation does little to win the hearts and minds of citizens; it does not put food on the table or lead to better health outcomes. At the same time, donors must link this short-term delivery-based agenda to a broader strategy that addresses the root causes of fragility in the country. If not, they are merely performing a patch-up service

and risk being dragged back as the country reverts to the status quo ante and as crisis reemerges.

Donor nations also need to consider how to link stabilization efforts with state building/peace building and how to maintain coalitions of support that bridge the two processes. Stabilization efforts are reactive and crisis-driven. They also tend to attract resources and attention (and uncoordinated efforts) that quickly dissipate once the immediate crisis is contained. In Libya, a broad coalition backed by UN Security Council resolutions intervened to stop Qaddafi's assault on Benghazi, but following his death few donors stayed to help the rebuilding effort. Now Libya is arguably worse off than under Qaddafi; its people are divided, two rival governments battle for supremacy, and there is a security vacuum that has allowed criminality and terrorism to flourish. In Mali, a French military operation succeeded in pushing back the Islamists from most of northern Mali but the broader rebuilding and reconciliation process received less attention and fewer resources. Now the Islamists are staging a comeback, a UN mission is underfunded and distrusted by Malians, and the focus of the international community has moved elsewhere. This reactive approach is expensive and unsustainable, yet it is hard to galvanize support for preventative state building efforts that require more sustained effort and are harder to measure.

Conclusion

The concept of state fragility covers such a diversity of countries and problems that it is of limited utility as a unit of analysis. Donors have floundered in their efforts to help states emerging from crisis. There are few examples of success and even fewer that can be applied elsewhere. Like unhappy families, every fragile state is fragile in its own way, and societal fractures are often driven by long-standing perceptions, collective memories, and mutual distrust. It is time to take a fresh look at the concept of fragile states and try out new approaches in the field. Donors must be willing to step beyond their comfort zone, interacting with a broader set of partners both in the informal sector and at the subnational level. Most of all, they should try harder to understand the political realities of the fragile states in which they work and think strategically about how to overcome structural societal divides rather that pursue process-driven activities that may deliver measurable outcomes but ignore the root causes of stability.

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