IDOS POLICY BRIEF

State Fragility and Development Cooperation: Putting the Empirics to Use in Policy and Planning

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Summary

State fragility, which describes how different components of a state do (or do not) function, is a central concept for understanding how development activities and policies in complex political, humanitarian and conflict-affected contexts will (or will not) work in practice. Using fragility as a lens, we use feminist development policy and forced displacement as examples to demonstrate how different empirical conceptualisations of fragility can be used to uncover potential challenges and identify opportunities for more comprehensive policy and programming. These examples are only two ways one can apply the concepts of fragility of the OECD and the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). Indeed, these and other empirical concepts of state fragility have many applications and can be used to measure and understand state–society, conflict and humanitarian dynamics in myriad ways.

The longest-running among these kinds of models is the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace, 2023). Other models focus on state fragility as a function of different aspects of "stateness". This includes IDOS's Constellations of State Fragility typology, which clusters types of fragility based on strengths/weaknesses in key dimensions of statehood (Grävingholt et al., 2019). Some organisations have moved beyond an exclusive focus on the functioning of the state, with the OECD currently defining fragility contexts as the combination of risks and insufficient coping capacities of multiple levels of governance systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks (OECD, 2016). The IDOS and OECD concepts do not rank countries, and the methods used in both models allow them to be applied to different levels of analysis. Essentially, these empirical conceptualisations of state fragility can serve as useful heuristics for the policy-makers responsible for setting policy agendas in fragile contexts.

The key challenge for policy-makers that we address in this policy brief is the step from empirically categorising states' fragility, to using that empirical data to inform often fast-moving, idiosyncratic policy-making and implementation in fragile contexts. As noted previously, these concepts are heuristics; country-specific policy planning and implementation require more fine-grained monitoring of country contexts. To achieve this, we recommend:

- Donors should be aware that the suitability of a particular tool/ fragility lens depends on the specific problem at hand, and they should choose the tool following a rigorous problem analysis.

- Use Germany's leadership on feminist foreign and development policy to capture and highlight the full range of links between gender and fragility, and to continue strengthening feminist foreign and development policy in fragile contexts.

- In many cases, state fragility is a neighbourhood challenge that requires regional coordination in order to be managed. In the case of migration and displacement, donors can support the freedom of movement protocols in regional agreements such as ECOWAS and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

- Policy-makers and donor organisations should deepen investment in new avenues for collecting and standardising the data that is used to generate different empirical concepts of state fragility. This includes funding on-the-ground monitoring activities such as IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism in East Africa.

- Recognise that otherwise functional states can indeed have sub-national pockets of severe fragility, and that these variations in sub-national fragility can over time erode the capacity, legitimacy and authority of the state if left unchecked.

Overview of state fragility as a concept

State fragility is a relatively new concept for understanding the function (or dysfunction) of the state, with many models focusing on levels of violence within the state, and newer conceptual and empirical models expanding the definition to include institutional capacity and state legitimacy. Although conflict and violence are certainly simultaneously outcomes and drivers of state fragility, newer concepts such as IDOS's Constellations of State Fragility and the OECD's States of Fragility account for the function of municipal and financial authorities, social dynamics, citizen–state relations, violence and environmental factors, offering development cooperation actors new angles for addressing state fragility.

In the early 2000s state fragility was rooted in a securitised understanding of political and conflict risk. Much of the literature on state fragility stems from the idea of "failed states" that emerged in the mid-2000s and has focused on preventing terrorism and managing transnational threats. Since the late 2000s, there has been both an academic and policy discourse pushing back against the notion of "failed" states, calling for a more carefully defined idea of what failure and fragility mean when talking about states (Faust, Grävingholt, & Ziaja, 2015; Grävingholt, Ziaja, & Kreibaum, 2015). "Fragile" overtook "failed" as the dominant term used to refer to a weak state, and critical analyses of the securitised ways of initially understanding state fragility opened the space for a multi-dimensional notion of how a state could be fragile. One of the key problems with measuring and categorising fragility, though, is that it is easy to fall into a number of logical or analytic traps, either by omission or commission.

There are two types of models of state fragility: indexes that rank and present countries in the order of measured fragility, and non-rank ordered models that describe how fragility manifests in different states. Composite indexes such as the Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace, 2023) represent a classic approach to indexing and ranking states. These types of state fragility measures are the most accessible and follow a logical method; variables are analysed to create an index score, then countries are organised from lowest score (least fragile) to highest (most fragile). One problem with this approach is understanding why the countries in the middle range would be comparable. Very fragile and least fragile states in the Fragile States Index share regional and socio-economic factors (Somalia, Yemen and South Sudan are the most fragile, whereas Norway, Iceland and Finland are the least fragile). In the middle range it is less clear why states are ranked the way they are. For example, Bolivia is the 81st most fragile state in the index followed by Fiji, which is the 82nd. It is not shared regional effects that put them close together on the Fragile States Index's scale, and the domestic aspects of fragility they experience may not be comparable. For policy-making, a rank ordering that does not group countries by analytic or regional comparability is not particularly helpful, which is why other models of fragility take a multidimensional as opposed to list-ranked approach to measuring state fragility.

The IDOS Constellations of State Fragility concept uses the empirical dimensions of state capacity, authority and legitimacy to statistically assign countries to a fragility "constellation" (Grävingholt et al., 2015).[1] The OECD concept focuses on fragile contexts and broadly consists of the combination of risks and insufficient coping capacities of the state, systems and/or communities. The OECD concept measures and categorises fragility by assessing risks and coping capacities in six areas: societal, economic, environmental, security, human capital and political dimensions (OECD, 2022). The advantage of non-

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1 Updated through 2020; the latest data is available at: www.statefragility.info

rank-ordered concepts such as those of IDOS and the OECD is that they show the unique aspects of how fragility manifests in different states. They do this in ways that lend them to different levels of analysis, which can be useful to policy-makers and implementers, depending on the policy question at hand. The following section offers examples of how to use the OECD and IDOS models in different ways in order to understand the manner in which different political and social factors affect – and are affected by – state fragility.

Linking state fragility to thematic areas of development cooperation

To put the concept of fragility and different fragility models into practical use, we offer two examples: understanding the relationships between gender and state fragility within the state using the OECD concept, and using the IDOS concept to understand how fragility relates to forced displacement between states. We selected these two examples given their current importance in development cooperation debates. It is important to note that these are not the only two issues that can be viewed through the lens of fragility. Other researchers, for example, have looked at the relationship between fragility and conflict mitigation (Brinkerhoff, 2011), and state fragility and aid effectiveness (Zürcher, 2012). Policy-makers also use these concepts, including the UN General Assembly and private-sector investors (World Bank, 2022). Our aim is to simply provide two contemporary, tangible examples for applying the concept of fragility – using the OECD and IDOS concepts – to policy-relevant questions.

What are the links between gender and state fragility?

This section shows how gender and state fragility are interconnected – and that attention to these links can make work on gender equality more effective. On the one hand, a fragility perspective can improve support for gender equality. Although people's experiences vary between contexts and between different groups of men and women (e.g.

depending on their age or socio-economic status), fragility triggered by conflict, public health emergencies and other crises tend to exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities, including gender-based violence and unpaid care burdens disproportionately faced by women and girls, for instance. At the same time, women often assume new roles during such crises. Many begin to serve as heads of household and the main providers, for example. This does not equal empowerment, and risks of backlash are high. Awareness of the distinct gender equality challenges posed by wider fragility can strengthen support to women and girls and help donors avoid doing harm. At the same time, understanding these connections can highlight openings to advance gender equality in the longer term. These can include opportunities to build on existing changes in gender roles propelled by conflict and crisis. Institutional and political reforms in fragile settings can moreover provide windows of opportunity to integrate women's rights and participation into the foundations of new regimes, states and institutions – promising a leap forward in women's formal rights. Although "real change" takes time, these changes in institutions and formal rights can provide an important basis for longer-term advocacy. Awareness of these openings can improve outcomes for women and girls. These distinct risks and entry points for gender equality suggest that feminist foreign and development policy may often be particularly needed – and potentially particularly fruitful – in fragile contexts.

At the same time, applying a gender perspective in these environments can help tackle fragility challenges. Broadly speaking, gender norms mean that men and women as well as boys and girls experience fragility differently. Women's active participation can make important contributions to resilience and recovery. For example, their access to (quality) jobs significantly enhances economic recovery (Justino et al., 2012). Expectations for male behaviour that idealise dominance and aggression, in turn, are not only root causes of gender inequality and

violence against women, but also help armed groups recruit men for public violence (e.g. OECD, 2019). An approach to state fragility that recognises gender norms and relations – including the gendered experiences of men and boys – is therefore essential to fully understand fragility and avoid doing harm through development interventions in fragile settings. In these and other ways, gender inequalities are then not only outcomes but also contributing factors and features of fragility. Understanding these connections can highlight new entry points for effective, meaningful efforts to address fragility challenges. Varied correlations between the gender inequality index and all dimensions of fragility presented in the OECD's latest States of Fragility report (Figure 1) illustrate connections between gender and fragility. Delving deeper into these quantitative correlations may provide new insights about relationships between gender and different dimensions of state fragility, offering further guidance on strategic entry points.

Figure 1: Correlations between gender inequality and fragility in the OECD's fragility framework
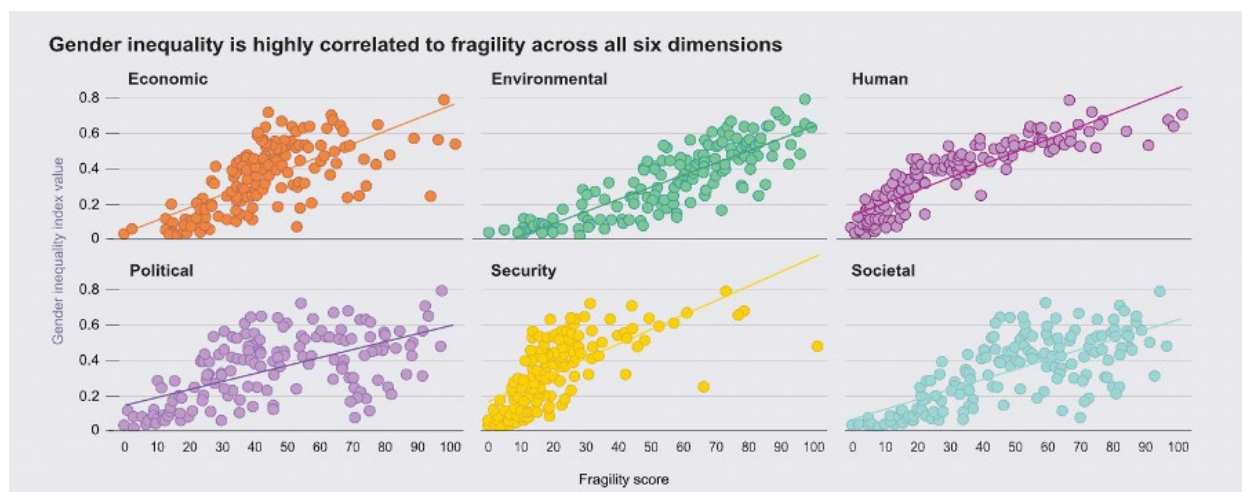
Source: OECD (2022). Reused under CC-BY copyright.

Yet, a gender perspective can also shed new light on the *concept* of fragility as such, strengthening awareness of the advantages and limitations of common definitions and "measurements" of fragility (Koester, 2023). In particular, the state-centred paradigm at the heart of many concepts and measurements of fragility can lead to the marginalisation of women's specific needs. Historically, many of women's distinct concerns – including their physical security from intimate partner violence, for instance – were defined as beyond the core responsibilities of the state. From this perspective, a state can perform its "basic functions" without responding to women's basic needs. This raises questions about the extent to which common, state-centred fragility concepts and measures "work" for women. Limitations in sub-national data and gender data hold this focus on the state in place and make many of women's distinct experiences and contributions invisible. In recent years, the OECD has taken steps to reduce the focus on the state in its definition and measurement of fragility and concentrate on a broader range of fragility contexts. Accordingly, the title of its fragility publication series shifted from *Fragile States* to *States of Fragility*. These and other efforts to increasingly define fragility from the perspective of affected people – rather than only from the perspective of an idealised state – can draw increased attention to the risks faced by women and girls and make their needs and contributions more central to fragility debates.

There are a number of gaps and opportunities in seizing links between gender and fragility in practice. Based on a review of Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' work on

gender in fragile settings, OECD research has particularly called for increased attention to underlying social norms (including norms for male behaviour), and for women's agency in fragile contexts to be recognised and supported, going beyond a view of women as being only passive victims of circumstances (Koester et al., 2016; OECD, 2017).

These and other reviews have also highlighted a range of underlying gaps and opportunities in DAC member policies and organisational practices. They include improving integration between relevant policy frameworks (on conflict, fragility and the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, on the one hand, and gender/ women, peace and security on the other) to reflect the full range of connections between gender and fragility. There is also a need for gender-sensitive fragility analysis and diagnostics to highlight these interlinkages and for strengthening staff capacity on gender and fragility at all levels (see also OECD, 2021). Moreover, recent work at the OECD highlights significant opportunities to develop more gender-sensitive concepts and measurements of fragility (Loudon, Goemans, & Koester, 2021), including by re-examining their relative state-centrism (Koester, 2023). To help do so, donors need to invest in more and better gender and sub-national data.

State fragility's relationship to forced displacement: applying the IDOS Constellations model

State fragility can also impact cross-border and regional events, and understanding the relation-ship between state fragility and specific geo-graphic outcomes such as forced displacement can be a challenging task (Martin-Shields, 2023). However, with forced displacement being a leading policy issue in development cooperation for the foreseeable future, a fragility lens can shed light on certain patterns of forced displacement. As an example, we will unpack how state fragility and forced displacement relate to one another, and to do this it is helpful to switch the measure being used for state fragility. To understand why people move between countries, a measure that categorises countries by the most statistically likely type of fragility offers a more cross-national, state-level analytic lens. For this kind of cross-national lens, we shift from the OECD's context-oriented concept to Grävingholt et al.'s (2019) IDOS Constellations of State Fragility concept, which uses the state as the unit for measuring fragility.

Table 1 shows the average total movement of people (displaced people, regular migrants, refugees) between different constellations of fragility from 2010 to 2015, with data on migration taken from Abel and Sander's (2014) estimates of cross-border flows between countries. Analysing movement between states based on the primary type of fragility helps show how movement evolves between different categories of state fragility. Large volumes of people leave dys-functional and low-authority states for the obvious reason of seeking physical safety – many of these states are affected by civil conflict. Examples in 2015 included Libya, Syria and Afghanistan. Many people also leave low-capacity states, where public services and economic prospects are acutely limited. Where do they arrive? They arrive in low-legitimacy states, which broadly feature authoritarian governments and limited democratic activity, and often border low-capacity and dysfunctional states.

Table 1: Highest average movement of people from origin to destination constellations of fragility

Origin / destination	Low-legitimacy	Semi-functional	Well-functioning
Dysfunctional	1,792		
Low-authority		7,855	
Low-capacity	3,852		
Low-legitimacy			3,006
Semi-functional			2,865
Well-functioning	271		

Note: Dysfunctional, low-authority and low-capacity destinations are excluded since they were not the highest average recipient regions of migrants and displaced people.

Source: Authors, created with data from Grävingholt et al. (2019) and Abel and Sander (2014)

For displaced people, although well-functioning states with better economies and democratic governments may be the preferred destinations, physical safety in a low-legitimacy state (however tenuous) in the short term is preferable to waiting for resettlement in a conflict zone. These results motivate potential policy questions. How can donors address the state capacity deficits that force people to move? This is not just a migration policy question, but also has importance for wider foreign policy and strategic considerations. For example, knowing that people tend to move to low-legitimacy states, how can investment in low-capacity states reduce the likelihood of low-legitimacy states using migration and refugee policy as a bargaining chip with donors? Fragility concepts that categorise states by the predominant dimension of state fragility that defines that state – like the IDOS concept – help concretise the cross-border effects of state fragility, in this case on forced displacement, which is helpful in guiding policy-makers to identify the geographic spaces where more fine-grained monitoring should be invested.

However, to fully realise the policy and research opportunities that come with understanding the relationship between state fragility and forced displacement, international policy processes such as the Global Compact on Refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018) will have to follow through on their data collection and standardisation goals. Right now, forced migration and migration data tend to be sparse, like the once-every-five-years data drops that Abel and Sander use to estimate how many people move between countries, or highly context-dependent data on refugees and migration, such as that from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Improvements in global data standards for migration that contain meta data about reasons for migration as well as demographic data could be of significant use to policy-makers as well as researchers. Improving annual country-level data – particularly on country of origin *and* arrival – on displacement and asylum seeking is crucial to linking the neighbourhood effects that can be seen in Table 1 with the more disaggregated sub-national data available from the OECD. When dealing with state fragility as either a topic of policy or research, the goal should be to understand it as a multi-dimensional and multi-level phenomenon that requires intervention at the local, national and regional levels.

Future outlook and policy advice

State fragility has conceptually evolved from its narrow security-focused domain into a multi-variate, complex approach to understanding risks and strengths marking countries around the world. For policy-makers in the development cooperation

and humanitarian spheres, the concept of fragility and the various methods of categorising and measuring it can be useful when applied appropriately. Our aim in the previous examples is to show how different tools and measures are needed when trying to grapple with different policy challenges. When the aim is to develop a better understanding of how fragility manifests across social or environmental domains within a state, the OECD's States of Fragility concept can be useful. If the goal is to understand fragility of the state in a way that easily lends itself to cross-national comparison, Grävingholt et al.'s (2019) Constellations of State Fragility can be useful, especially since the constellations are visualised at the state level on an interactive map.

In this paper we argued that three key future trends can be understood more holistically by adopting a fragility lens, then showed how the nature of these trends can be analysed using different empirical fragility concepts:

- Migration and displacement, especially in fragile contexts, can strain already thin national administrative and economic systems. Donor countries and humanitarian agencies will have to support fragile states with hosting displaced people, while also finding ways to work with authoritarian governments on displacement responses without compromising on human rights and democratic values.

- Recognising the value of a gender perspective (including an understanding of gender norms and rules for male behaviour), policy-makers need to grapple with the gender dimensions of new and rapidly evolving challenges – including climate change and digital technologies, for instance – and their roles in perpetuating gender inequalities in fragile contexts.

- Conflict and insurgency remain a central challenge when addressing state fragility. Indeed, state fragility is conceptually rooted in security studies, and while it has expanded beyond that base, physical and human security remain central to understanding state fragility.

Addressing these trends, however, is no easy task for policy-makers in the current political environment. When we turn to the relationship between displacement and state fragility, policy-makers not only need to contend with the technical aspect of providing humanitarian support, but also shoring up resources in donor countries where the domestic politics of migration and refugees are fraught with xenophobia. Policy-makers should resist the temptation to frame addressing state fragility as a means for preventing migration; indeed, development and aid do not reduce migration but can play a role in mitigating forced displacement (Martin-Shields, Schraven, & Angenendt, 2017). When faced with (multiple) crises, there could be a perception that gender is a long-term, relative "luxury" issue that can be addressed later on, rather than a perspective that can make urgent work more effective and help seize windows of opportunity during crises. This leads to missed chances. In order to effectively address these challenges as part of a multidimensional response to state fragility, we recommend the following:

- Feminist development policy represents an opportunity to respond to the links between gender and fragility and their particular significance in fragile contexts. Addressing governance, conflict and economic health through a gender-relational perspective – including concepts of masculinity – is key to understanding the full range of connections between gender and fragility.

- In many cases, state fragility is a neighbourhood challenge and requires regional coordination in order for it to be managed. In the case of migration and displacement, donors can support the freedom of movement protocols in regional agreements such as ECOWAS and IGAD.

- Donors need to help fill data gaps. Subnational data on migration and gender-disaggregated data are key to understanding different patterns of state fragility. For many low- and middle-income countries, financial

support for better data collection would be beneficial for building an evidence base on how fragility manifests in the lives of different groups of people.

- Pockets of fragility below the state level are a new area where policy-makers should focus efforts. Reforming and building the capacity of the state along with good governance and democratic values are key avenues to reducing sub-national pockets of state fragility. The IDOS and OECD models provide different modes of understanding state fragility that can serve as heuristics for shaping development and humanitarian policy in different contexts.

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