Fragile and failed States: Critical Perspectives on Conceptual Hybrids
(Literature Review Essay)

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Over the last decade, a number of western government agencies and international organisations have increasingly turned their attention to fragility and failure of state institutions as a major international policy challenge in the fields of security and development assistance. The concepts of “fragile” and “failed states” are now widely used in diplomatic negotiations on global security, peacekeeping operations, poverty reduction strategies, humanitarian assistance, and even international trade agreements. The notion of fragile state, in particular, has been valued by western government actors and policy analysts to label and rank a number of developing countries facing violence and conflict, political instability, severe poverty, and other threats to security and development, like Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Chad. In such countries, it is assumed that enduring political tensions, lack of security, and the inability of public administrations to provide essential services for citizens will impede self-reliant development, and thereby pose a potential threat to regional or global security.

The categories of “failed” and “fragile” states are relatively new to the international discourse on development and security, as are their related concepts. The two categories did not emerge at the same time, nor did they follow the same trajectories. The concept “failed state” was introduced by foreign policy analysts in the early 1990s, in the context of the post-Cold War, when authors sought to describe the alarming proliferation of civil conflicts that could engender, in some countries, the fragmentation of state institutions, economic recession, and deterioration of security conditions. The outbreak of wars in Bosnia and Croatia, the factional conflicts in Somalia, poverty and social anomy in Haiti, Cambodia's inability to put an end to the guerrilla activity of the Khmers Rouge, and more generally the development of “new wars” beyond the model of conventional warfare, induced a growing number of policy analysts to forge new categories – such as quasi-state (Jackson 1990), failed state (Helman and Ratner 1992) or collapsed state (Zartman 1995) – in order to address the new threats to peace and security. Subsequently, the concepts of “failing” and “failed state” have been widely disseminated by U.S. administrations and American policy analysts after September 11, 2001 (henceforth 9/11), especially in the field of international security.

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As for the notion of “fragile state”, it has spread internationally among donors, technical agencies and various governments, particularly in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance, and peace-building. In particular, it has been widely used by the OECD and the World Bank since the mid-2000s, to designate the poorest and most unstable countries that cannot meet minimum standards set by major donors of development aid (Chauvet and Collier, 2004). Many other related notions are frequently used. Depending on authors, states can be described as weak, vulnerable, unstable, insecure, in crisis, collapsed, fragmented, suspended, broken, shadow, quasi- and warlord states, among others. The list could go on. Each concept refers to a specific situation and can be broken down according to distinct sets of criteria. Nevertheless, like Carment et al. (2010, p. 7), many authors refer to “fragile state” as an overarching concept that encompasses a variety of notions (failed, failing, collapsed…) used by scholars and analysts to depict countries where the legitimacy, the authority, and the capacity of state institutions are dramatically declining, weak, or broken down. “Fragile state” is a generic and comprehensive category that has been shared by a large number of governments and international organizations since 2005, while “failed” and “failing states” remain more controversial notions in spite of their extensive use by the US policymakers in the last ten years.

Over the last ten years, the analytical scope of these concepts has been consolidated via a “gray literature” consisting of a wide range of concept notes, discussion papers, and policy guidelines produced by government agencies and international institutions themselves. Additional materials have come from think tanks and groups of policy analysts, as well as from academics involved in consulting activities in the areas of foreign policy, defence, security and aid for development. In the early 2000s, a constant flow of strategic papers and policy notes helped to disseminate these concepts throughout various international policy forums and networks. A wide ranging group of influential experts and analysts provided definitions, published case studies and comparative analysis, selected indicators, and developed new taxonomies and classifications for fragile and failed states. Their discussion not only helped legitimize the issue of fragility with diplomats, military authorities, aid actors, and humanitarians, but also tended to set up these policy-oriented categories as analytical concepts, which meant that academics began using these terms to designate countries facing severe political, social or economic turbulence.

The notions 'fragile state' and 'failed state' began to attract increasing attention from social scientists during the 2000s, since they had been circulating within Western public administrations, international organizations, influential think tanks, and the media. Many scholars tried to use them as analytical categories in the fields of political science, economics, and international relations, especially in development and security studies. As scientific concepts, they have been used to define and classify countries in which state institutions are unstable, contested, and dysfunctional due to civil conflicts, extreme

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2 In this paper, I use the first concept as an umbrella term that comprises other notions; but I also use “failed” and “failing states” when referring to authors who specifically recourse to these categories.
poverty, terrorism, transnational criminal activities, natural disasters, and even health and environmental crises.

Surprisingly, in the early 2000s, there were still no critical academic studies exploring the underlying tenets of this new policy debate on fragile and failed states, even though the new rhetoric on security and development had already started to gain ground in the U.S. foreign policy. It was only after 2005 that a few academics started to give attention to the conceptual limitations of these notions. The following paper focuses on critical approaches that have been disputing the heuristic dimension of these notions in recent years. Part 1 briefly presents some commonalities of the literature on fragile and failed states. Part 2 deals with five sets of critical ideas that have recently emerged in academic studies. Part 3 pays particular attention to two opposed intellectual positions: the first proposes that the most controversial notions be discarded in favor of alternate concepts; the second one examines a better analytical framework that could help turn these fuzzy policy labels into rigorous concepts.

The global success of the literature on state fragility and failure

The literature on fragile and failed states is very diverse and abundant. It was fairly developed in foreign policy circles before being taken up by the academic community. It comprises various intellectual productions, including policy notes, political statements and national strategies in the fields of diplomacy, defence and development; policy-oriented studies from independent analysts, think tanks and consulting firms; and more conceptual analyses published in scientific journals and academic books.

The global interest in the fragile and failed state issue partly results from massive public research grants awarded by the U.S. and British governments in the early 2000s. The influence of these two governments on the normative work of international organizations such as OECD and the World Bank has also been a powerful factor in the development of the literature on state fragility (Bouchet, 2011). But such considerable interest also goes with the semantic plasticity of the notions, which allows them to be appropriated in very different ways by policymakers and analysts. Most studies acknowledge the absence of any universally accepted criteria for objectively defining a fragile or a failed state (Cammack et al., 2006; Brinkerhoff, 2007; Stewart and Brown, 2009). Different groups of experts in government institutions, consultants and policy analysts, as well as independent think tanks, have put forth an increasing number of case studies, typologies and indexes to measure the fragility or failure of states – for example, the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) established by the Center for Global Policy with the support of the CIA; the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (FSI); the World Bank’s Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA); the Brookings Institution’s Index of State Weakness in the Developing World; or the Fragility Index elaborated by Carment et al. (2010). Their analytical models are often highly sophisticated, using sets of indicators that cover a wide range of political, economic, social, and security issues. Yet instead of converging, these models have led to a proliferation of definitions, assumptions and criteria. The notion of fragility has been rendered particularly obscure. In general, most analytical models seek to combine different dimensions of fragility. Brinkerhoff distinguishes three such dimensions of fragility: security, effectiveness and legitimacy. Stewart and Brown identify three types of state failure in authority, in service delivery
and in legitimacy. Most often, the models also take into account the degree of unrest and violence, in empirical cases, in order to analytically distinguish situations where state disintegration and collapse would eliminate any possibility of collective regulation at the country level from situations where the government faces potential internal and external threats yet still maintains some legitimacy and/or institutional capacity.

The literature on fragile and failed states seeks to question specific traits that characterize a number of countries where the state power is unable or unwilling to carry out core functions and roles traditionally assigned to the Weberian state model. It deals with a continuum of situations where states do not respond to the challenges of security and governance within their national boundaries. The literature is eclectic and uneven. It addresses a wide variety of questions associated with the legitimacy of state institutions, their authority over national territory, and their capacity to deliver basic services to the population in times of political and economic crisis. Many prominent studies tacitly assume that there is a link between security and development, both for the so-called fragile countries, and for neighbouring countries and western democracies (Gros, 1996; Ignatieff 2002; Rotberg, 2003; Collier, 2007; Kaplan, 2008; Iqbal and Starr, 2008). They also assume that a functioning and legitimate state is a prerequisite for re-establishing peace and security, economic development, and social order (USAID, 2005; Krasner and Pascual, 2005; Brinkerhoff, 2007; Zoellick, 2008; OECD, 2010; World Bank, 2011), and even democratic development (Kraxberger, 2007; Collmer, 2009). Beyond these commonalities, the literature comprises a large variety of studies, which can be roughly divided into two groups of approaches using Bertoli and Ticci’s (2012) distinction between “outcome-based definitions” and “dynamic interpretations” of fragile states (although the two authors focus on fragility in development studies alone.) On the one hand, most policy-oriented studies associate fragile states with specific institutional settings and functions that are assumed to be instrumental for stabilising society. Such approaches are centred on the state's capacity to promote development and to provide security. They mainly respond to the donor community’s expectations for improved aid effectiveness and security responses within poor and unstable contexts. For instance, most indexes and definitions developed by development aid organisations – such as the World Bank, OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, US Agency for International Development, UK Department for International Development – have helped shape this perspective (see also: Chesterman et al, 2005; Kaplan, 2008; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008).

On the other hand, other approaches concentrate on dynamic processes leading to the destabilization, fragmentation, decay and breakdown of state institutions. They concentrate on causal factors leading to state fragility, and to a lesser extent, on the latter's effects in terms of poverty and threats to security. They suggest a number of key elements liable to erode the capacity, authority and legitimacy of a state's power. Some factors may be internal to the political structure (e.g. poor bureaucratic performance, autocratic leadership, corrupted elites); others are associated with major challenges facing the society (e.g. civil conflicts, poverty traps, social inequalities, criminal activities); and then there are the external factors (e.g. outbreak of war, foreign interference, economic shock, environmental degradation), and historical legacies (e.g. colonial mistreatment, Cold War). Most dynamic studies seek to combine these different factors (Gros, 1996; Ignatieff 2002; Rotberg, 2004; Stewart and Brown, 2009; Patrick, 2011).
This new policy and research agenda has provided some insights into the situation shared by countries affected by war and poverty. It has brought to light the vital role of state institutions in humanitarian, peace-building and development responses. It has also led to a greater recognition of the responsibility of the state in fostering democratic governance, protecting human rights, and ensuring its citizens’ well-being. In parallel, it has drawn greater attention to potential threats associated with the risk of “privatisation” of states (including patronage arrangements in the state, and predation on public resources by political elites). The new research agenda has also been instrumental in redirecting policy attention and resource flows towards the countries most in need, thereby moving beyond the criteria of selectivity and conditionality that had become prominent in development assistance since the late 1990s. It has highlighted the connection between international stability and domestic politics in developing countries, as well as the potential relationship between development challenges, political orders and security threats. It has called the attention of policymakers to the need to better discriminate, balance, and also interconnect three different challenges to be considered in state-building policies (capacity, authority, and legitimacy). Despite these few insights, the notions of fragile and failed states have been highly contested in recent years.

**The analytical pitfalls of fragile and failed state studies**

The early 2000s yielded practically no critical thinking about the drawbacks and pitfalls of the new debate on fragile and failed states. On the contrary, many experts and analysts attempted to bolster the new US policy discourse, and thus they extensively explored the possible relationship between state failures and threats to peace and security. It was only after 2006, when the notions of fragile and failed states had begun to figure prominently in US security strategy and in the agenda of various multilateral organizations, that some scholars started to pay greater attention to the conceptual shortcomings that could undermine this rhetoric. Five different critical arguments in the recent literature on fragile and failed states have emphasized the limitations which prevent the use of these concepts to describe state institutions affected by violent conflict and great poverty.

**Political labelling**

The prescriptive use of these concepts by political leaders and policymakers is the first major obstacle. Such concepts cannot be isolated from the conditions under which they emerged and gained entry into the western political lexicon on security and development. They were categories forged in the context of the post-Cold War, supported by a limited number of governments that disseminated them with a view to advancing a new security agenda after 9/11, and also to dealing with non-performing countries after western donors shifted toward performance-based allocation mechanisms for distributing official development assistance. They served as key notions for the Bush administration in the legitimisation of the new U.S. strategy in the fields of defence, international development, and national security – including the “war on terror” launched by the after 9/11 (Rotberg, 2003). To a large extent, they also reflect the international aid strategies set by multilateral organizations placed under the control of western countries, notably the World Bank, OECD, and EU institutions. Therefore, they cannot be disassociated from the western powers’ military doctrines, diplomatic options, and economic choices.
For all these reasons, they can hardly be used as scientific concepts that could help to explore, in a neutral way, the multifaceted security and development challenges affecting state institutions in developing countries.

M. Bøås et K. Jennings (2005) were among the first scholars to reflect on the category of failed state as characterising a new public discourse that aimed at legitimizing intrusive policy interventions by the most powerful western states in war-torn countries, at a time when the new international context was marked by the disappearance of the bipolar world order. Such a concept could be used to justify forms of political interference in the internal affairs of certain states, while the theoretical robustness of the principle of sovereignty was called into debate by certain international relations experts (Krasner, 2004 and 2005; Fukuyama, 2004; Kagan, 2008). Two years later, Boas and Jennings (2007) argued that the link established in the early 2000s between state failure and international security threats (e.g. 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy, 2003 European Security Strategy, USAID 2004-2009 Strategic Plan) primarily served the objectives and interests of western powers. Drawing on five case studies, the authors pointed out that the states were labelled as failed only when western interests seemed directly threatened. Such labelling justified policy responses in Afghanistan, Somalia and Liberia, while it has never been used in situations of conflict in Sudan (Darfur) and Nigeria (Niger Delta).

On this basis, some other authors started to claim that poorly-defined concepts such as fragile and failed states are likely to be manipulated by government authorities for the purpose of wielding power, and therefore diverged from internationally-agreed principles. These concepts, they held, were part of a policy discourse to advance the implementation of new strategic options in the fields of diplomacy, defence and development assistance in the early 2000s. They were providing the grounds for interventionist policies to resolve regional conflicts, counter transnational terrorism, and combat international organized crime. Ultimately, they could justify western interference in the internal affairs of poor countries. Noam Chomsky (2006) makes a scathing criticism in a pamphlet: he regards the failed state concept as an "ideological invention" used to legitimize U.S. foreign interventions and to strengthen the American supremacy in the world order, an order which benefits, first and foremost, the "economic and strategic interests" of the elite who rule over domestic politics. David Chandler (2006) emphasizes the political motivations that pushed western governments to provide technocratic solutions in the so-called failed states, specifically their ‘state-building’ expertise. He argues that the design of political institutions established by NATO and the EU in Bosnia and Kosovo were an explicit demonstration of the eagerness of European and U.S. authorities to create states without the actual capacity for self-government

Tom Porteous (2007) criticizes the formation of a “military-developmental complex” behind the rhetoric of altruistic international aid toward fragile states. This complex is dominated by western countries, and supports a project of social, political and economic transformation, one designed to stabilize fragile or failed states by means of a cocktail of

3 Chopra (2002) and Lemay-Hebert (2011) also describe UN interventions in Timor-Leste and Kosovo as key examples of an “empty-shell” approach that resulted in the co-option of local elites and the marginalization of the local population.
deeply intrusive remedies in the realms of political governance, economic deregulation and privatization, consolidation of civil society and reform of the security sector.

All these authors examine the discourse on fragile states as a policy narrative that serves to justify policy interventions aiming at peacebuilding, statebuilding and nationbuilding, and that therefore cannot be dissociated from the risk that western nations will be led to interfere in the domestic affairs of poorer countries. It contributes to a large extent to the development of "neo-colonialism" (Pfaff, 1995) or “postmodern imperialism” (Fearon and Laitin, 2003), an international domination that no longer relies on the military conquest of a territory, but instead results from the establishment, by the great powers and for a limited time, of governance systems that bring together international organizations, western bilateral agencies and domestic authorities in countries rebuilding after conflict or disaster – such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan.

These critical approaches show that the emergence of the discourse on fragile and failed states has not primarily served as a way to meet the needs of populations suffering from warfare situations and bad governance. It mainly reflects strategic and financial concerns shared by a limited number of western governments. It is a cognitive tool that fuels “operational doctrines” on international security and development, and helps to promote certain public interests in international negotiations. It has been instrumental in the production of legitimate discourse in international relations. It is thus regrettable that so few scholars have analysed the political use of the notions of fragile and failed states. Most critical scholars prefer to emphasize the analytical weaknesses of these concepts.

*Portmanteau concepts*

One of the most salient analytical limitations of studies on fragile and failed states lies in the authors’ inability to agree on a stable definition of the concept. These polysemic concepts are subject to a variety of conceptual uses. They become overloaded with multiple meanings, making them deeply ambiguous and elusive. They refer to diverse elements of reality, depending on whether authors are dealing with the efficiency of public administrations, the legitimacy of government institutions, international and national security, or the well-being of local populations. These concepts are sometimes used to describe the incapacities and dysfunctions of state institutions (Miliken and Krause, 2002; DFID, 2005; OECD, 2007; Ikpe, 2007; Zoellick, 2009; World Bank, 2011): low government performance, weak governance, inability to provide basic services to populations, absence of a representative government, level of corruption within the bureaucratic apparatus, predation on public resources by governmental elites. They can refer more broadly to domestic contexts marked by political instability, insecurity and violence: civil wars, guerrillas, religious or ethnic conflicts, intense social protests, drug cartels, private militias or criminal gangs, human rights abuses, infringements of the rule of law (Clapham, 2002; Collier et al., 2003; François and Sud, 2006). They are sometimes associated with economic hardship: extreme poverty, and breakdown of economic markets (Chauvet and Collier, 2005). They also call attention to problems of border security (military threats from neighbouring states, regional insecurity) and uncontrolled transnational transfers (refugee flows, economic migration, trans-border terrorist networks, arms trafficking) (Krasner and Pascual, 2005). Finally,
they often allude to health risks (plagues, famines, water access), demographic challenges (population density), and environmental threats (Patrick, 2011). Undoubtedly, the overuse of the concept by government institutions, consultants, policy analysts, and academics, simply multiplies the types of situations described and the policy problems studied.

Most scholars acknowledge the conceptual instability of these concepts. Therefore, they compete to put forth well-researched definitions that attempt to be specific and, at the same time, to integrate multi-faceted social and institutional realities. They often advance their own definition of fragility from which they develop a new analytical framework. Most of them seek to combine general assumptions and situation-specific criteria that pay particular attention to the contextual dimensions of state fragility (Rotberg, 2004; Cammack et al., 2006; Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, 2008; Stewart and Brown, 2009). However, they never make use of the same criteria. Some give priority to a state-centric analysis (Rotberg, 2004; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008) while others emphasize the important relationship between state institutions and social or political dynamics (Ikpe, 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2007). Some focus on the outcomes of fragility. For example, the state can be described as fragile/failed when it fails to perform its core functions, especially the delivery of public goods and basic, life-sustaining services (DFID, 2005; OECD, 2007); or when it fails to guarantee national security and the right of the state to exercise the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence over a territory (USAID, 2005); or to maintain the efficiency and capacity of government (World Bank, 2005); or to ensure the legitimacy of the state in society (OECD, 2010). Others insist instead on the sources and factors that can contribute to the collapse of public institutions that are key for security and development (Moreno-Torres and Vallings, 2005). Still others intend to provide policy solutions and focus on the conditions of state reconstruction, especially those who examine humanitarian interventions, state-building policies, governance challenges, and democratization in post-conflict and post-disaster situations (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Collmer, 2009).

Finally, these approaches have only concurred in that they have created various competing definitions, each with an accumulation of diverse indicators. Such multifarious definitions and indicators ultimately limit the analytical salience of the notion (Gourevitch, 2005; Call, 2008; Di John, 2010; Bertoli and Ticci, 2012). Call rejects the specious reasoning that use a single term “failed state” to lead to “a super-aggregation of very diverse sorts of states and their problems”. The term is used in various indexes, each of them proposing specific institutional and social traits to define “state fragility” – such as in the 160 sub-indicators reported in 2011 in the Fund for Peace’s Failed States Index (FSI). This approach allows an infinite number of criteria, making the notion of fragile/failed state even more obscure. It does not distinguish what differentiates the fragile state concept from other concepts previously used to describe the conditions of underdevelopment and extreme poverty – such as least developed countries, countries under stress, least advanced countries, low-income countries. Putzel (2010) notes that the “consensus definition” that has emerged among bilateral donors around the OECD’s Principles (OECD 2007) “fails to distinguish between the particular conditions of ‘fragility’ and the general conditions of ‘underdevelopment’”. According to OECD, “states are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security
and human rights of their populations”. This definition can be applied to almost all poor
similar criticism to the World Bank’s CPIA definition of state fragility, which mainly
refers to the criteria of aid effectiveness. This vagueness has led some authors to identify
violence and conflicts as the defining characteristics of a fragile/failed state (Rotberg,
2004; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Putzel, 2010).
The notion of fragile state, in particular, has become a portmanteau word. It is a ‘catch-all
phrase’ (Andersen, 2008; Putzel, 2010), an ‘all-encompassing label’ (Bertoli and Ticci,
2012), and consequently an ‘elusive concept’ (Carment et al. 2008). Ironically, this is one
of the reasons why it gained such importance as part of the international policy discourse:
the more extensive, porous and malleable the idea of state fragility became, the more it
could be appropriated and manipulated by actors and institutions holding conflicting
views, different interests and divergent policy options.

**Western-centrism**

Critics argue that most studies of state fragility and failure are based on a uniform,
simplistic analysis of political institutions. These studies establish criteria, research
hypotheses, and policy prescriptions that are grounded in a western-centric approach to
social order and political stability. They share the misguided view that the institutional
patterns and practices of Weberian states, embedded in western, developed economies,
can be transferred all at once to any poor and conflict-affected country. Bilgin and
Morton (2004), Gourevitch (2004), Brooks (2005), Bøås and Jennings (2007), Hagmann
and Hoehne (2009) and Nuruzzaman (2009) argue that the policy thinking and rhetoric
around state failure are closely tied to a view of the modern state system that presupposes
that all states rely on similar institutions and operate with convergent norms and rules.
States are considered as “solid” or “successful” when they meet western standards:
priority is given to political institutions over social and economic structures, to internal
security and legal order, to state control of the territory, to the provision of public
services, and to regulation of social and economic processes. They are also perceived as
functioning entities and legitimate actors when they are able or willing to function
according to the western donor assistance mechanisms. This approach to state robustness
is based on analytically superficial similarities that simply ignore the wide variety of
historical and cultural situations, which would require contextualized policy responses.
As stated by Bøås and Jennings, the dualistic categorisation of states as “functioning” or
“failing”, as propped up by donors and policymakers, is “reductive, non-contextual, and
ahistorical”. Bilgin and Morton, as well as Hagmann and Hoehne, also note that the
flawed assumptions about state uniformity are leading western powers and international
organizations to promote fixed, technocratic, quick and short-sighted interventions to
solve fragile states’ problems.

Call (2008) criticizes the notion of failed states insofar as it “contains culturally specific
assumptions about what a ‘successful’ state should look like”. This concept not only
“groups together disparate sorts of states with diverse problems” but also “leads to
narrow and univalent policy prescriptions”, in particular the one-size-fits-all, generic
state-building policies. Call identifies six deficiencies. First, as mentioned above, too
much diversity is forced under a single notion. Second, focusing on strengthening the
order and stability within failed state even when the prevailing political order rests on repression, corruption and discrimination, clearly serves the interests of western powers and their concern for security. It may even worsen the problems faced by the so-called failed states and their populations, and it does not respond to central challenges such as state legitimacy and effectiveness. Third, the focus on state-building solutions obscures the issue of “political regimes”. In particular it may help “avoid thorny issues of democratisation, representation, horizontal accountability and transparency”. Fourth, the correlation between state-building and peace-building remains specious, as the strengthening of state institutions can jeopardize peace and contribute to insecurity in certain contexts. For instance, it may fuel resentment and armed resistance in situations where international donors’ resources are reinforcing corruption, abusive authority and predatory activities at the state level. Fifth, the discourse on failed states is reactivating a teleological perspective that assumes all states should move towards a similar ‘successful’ endpoint, which largely conforms to the dominant western state model. In particular, it does not consider alternative forms of authority, service and security, which may include regional and international actors, transnational arrangements, tribal structures and local strongmen. Finally, Call notes that the failed state concept ignores the past evolution of those societies presented as fragile, including the role played by western colonial powers, Bretton Woods institutions, and development agencies, all of which should also be held accountable for the problems currently facing poor and unstable countries.

The promotion of non-contextual and ahistorical conceptions of state in western interventions for state-building has two consequences. Such interventions serve mainly to legitimize western policy options and normative goals, such as good governance programmes, security sector reform, and the model of liberal market democracies (Chandler, 2006). Externally sponsored state reconstruction efforts have also met with limited success in “fragile” contexts, such as in Africa (Englebert and Tull, 2008), and may also have exacerbated instability in political system already prone to crisis (Chopra, 2002; Zweiri et al., 2008; Putzel, 2010).

**Analytical reductionism**

The policy discourse on state fragility and failure primarily focuses on factors that erode the legitimacy, the authority and the capacity of formal state institutions within the public sphere: it is especially interested in the governmental and bureaucratic apparatus, the role of political leaders, and the involvement of political forces that challenge the running government. As a result, it gives inadequate attention to the informal structures that contribute to peace, stability and development in the society. It also underestimates external dependencies that affect the domestic politics of the so-called fragile countries.

First, the discourse reduces the success of the state to its capacity to manipulate coercive resources (Bilgin and Morton, 2004). Hence, it tends to underestimate institutions and

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4 In the 1980s, Migdal (1988) had already highlighted the risks of a western conception that consistently combines political stability with state control capacity, including in non-democratic regimes.
arenas outside the state perimeter, in particular non-state networks and informal economies (Brooks, 2005; Porteous, 2007; Batley and Mcloughlin, 2010) as well as sub-national political entities (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009). The question of state fragility and failure is addressed in terms of a development model that appears unable to factor in the complexity of socio-political systems in developing countries (Chesterman, 2005). It seems simplistic to build policy responses to the challenges of development and security without paying significant attention to parallel economies, to social solidarity structures, and more widely to groups and institutions established on a social, religious, community, economic and cultural basis, for these sometimes have a greater impact on the stabilisation of societies, economic growth, and peacekeeping. As noted by D. Darbon and P. Quantin (2007: 483) the issue of fragile states should not be reduced to the poor performance and institutional instability of the bureaucratic apparatus; it should deal with the conditions that help to create a trust-based social convention between social groups and state institutions.

Second, the discourse on fragile and failed states tends to overlook any external dependencies that may contribute to fragility within a given society. Even while the world grows ever-more globalized, with increasing transnational movements of goods and people, this discourse remains deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it goes beyond a classical realist analysis, especially in its analysis of "new threats" affecting global security. It takes into account the transnational dimension of threats in a multipolar world, including major global challenges that do not result from state activities, such as epidemics or environmental risks. On the other hand, this discourse aligns with a realist conception of security, since its answers to the problems of poverty and security primarily aim at maintaining the order and stability of nation states. This perspective has two serious flaws. First, it tends to reduce the study of fragility to national security threats – especially in western countries – and therefore does not pay much attention to the “human security” of the populations living in poor and unstable countries. Second, it tends to preclude a more comprehensive analysis of global structures or transnational movements that have an impact on domestic politics. As noted by Bilgin and Morton (2004) and Nuruzzaman (2009), it focuses attention on the internal characteristics of states and therefore prevents us from thinking their fragility/failure as the result of global political and economic structures and, more broadly, of a historical interdependence between the wealthiest countries and the poorest countries. It also prevents us from addressing security issues as resulting from activities involving global actors located concomitantly in southern and northern hemispheres. Porteous (2007) recalls that illegal activities affecting certain “fragile” countries are embedded in criminal networks involving actors from the North. Drug production, arms sales, human trafficking, and the illegal trade of raw materials, exotic woods, precious stones, pharmaceutical products, vehicles, cigarettes, alcohol, consumer goods luxury, clothing and food, do not benefit only the warlords, dictators, corrupted governmental officials, and drug traffickers in fragile states. Many transnational companies established in emerging or in industrialized countries bear some of the responsibility for transnational criminal and illegal activities. In a globalised world, it would be wrong to assume that the factors causing political instability and extreme poverty in so-called fragile countries are confined to their national boundaries.
Overall, fragile states are embedded in global structures and transnational exchanges that have a significant impact, positive or negative, on state institutions, their strength, vulnerability, and resilience. Focusing primarily on state-building inevitably means neglecting to critically analyse global interdependencies. Criticisms of this state-centric perspective were formulated with sufficient force to induce the OECD, in 2007, to substitute the notion of “fragile situations” for that of fragile states.

**Lack of empirical evidence**

A final set of criticisms comes from authors who grant the relationship between state fragility/failure, underdevelopment and international threats to security, but, at the same time, develop critical views that deal with some empirical limitations of this relationship. Their criticism is not radical, since they find it necessary to take into consideration state-building interventions in countries facing conflict and economic devastation. However, their critical approach unveils the anecdotal and superficial nature of most of the studies carried out, for more than a decade, on fragile and failed states. They reveal the striking contrast between the sweeping assumptions propagated by a wide range of policy analysts in development and security, on the one hand, and the lack of in-depth case-studies and thoughtful comparative analysis that could help to build empirical evidence on fragile states, on the other hand.

The recent work of Patrick (2011) fits into this perspective. It is noteworthy that the author is one of the experts who, for years, fuelled the discourse on failed states: first as analyst on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff under the first Bush administration, at the time of the military intervention in Afghanistan and the US-led assault on Iraq; then at the Brookings institution where he co-directed the development of an 'index of state weakness'. In the wake of his earlier articles (Patrick, 2006 and 2007), his book seems like an act of contrition, revealing his concerns regarding flimsy – and sometimes fallacious – assumptions made by US agencies on the relationship between state fragility and international security threats. Although Patrick carefully strikes a balance among the various arguments and does not refrain from providing new policy recommendations to the US government, he challenges the claims by US officials and international organisations that weak and failing states are likely to be systematically implicated in the emergence of new “global threats”. He argues, for instance, that transnational terrorist networks such as the Salafi djihadist movements do not flourish only in impoverished and unstable states, like Afghanistan or Sudan. They also settle in functioning states, like Pakistan or Kenya, where they have access to communication technology, transportation, and banking services. Patrick also holds that countries with “superficially strong” governmental institutions, such as Iran or North Korea, may exacerbate the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, even though such threats have often been linked with poorly-governed countries. He notes that transnational crime is imperfectly correlated with state weakness. Despite the fact that narcotics production, illegal arm trafficking, and maritime piracy may expand in fragile contexts, the correlation does not hold for human trafficking, money laundering, drug transit, or environmental crime. It is even weak when it comes to intellectual property theft, cybercrime, and the counterfeiting of manufactured goods. Patrick also observes that the threats to global energy security may emanate from high-scoring countries like
Venezuela, Iran, and Russia. As for the connection between pandemics and fragile states, the picture is mixed: the countries with a severe shortages in their public health infrastructure and services may be more vulnerable to infectious disease; nevertheless, there is no “hard and fast” relationship between the spread of epidemics and fragile states, especially in war zones or in situation of state collapse.

The link between state fragility and transnational threats may be observed in certain contexts, in specific policy areas, and for a given period of time. Nevertheless, there is no systematic correlation. On the contrary, a myriad of counter-examples may help to defend the opposite assumptions. What is still surprising is the lack of empirical analysis dedicated to investigating how institutional dysfunctions may be correlated with economic collapse, conflict and security challenges in specific national contexts.

**What’s next? Should scholars disregard or better conceptualize the notions of fragile and failed states?**

The many limitations of the notion of fragile state have led scholars to make two oppose intellectual claims. A few authors argue that the notion is analytically misleading because it is inherently superficial, confusing, and unstable; it would be better to abandon the notion and select alternative concepts. Other authors hold that the reason the notion has not led to many analytical insights simply because it has not been adequately conceptualized, and that a better research framework would turn this fuzzy policy-oriented label into a rigorous analytical concept.

Bøås and Jennings, Chomsky, Preble and Logan, Porteous, and Call, are all united behind the first claim. However, only Call (2008) attempts to search for alternative concepts that may be useful for addressing specific vulnerabilities and weaknesses of state institutions in countries affected by conflict and poverty. According to Call, the way to do so is to disaggregate comprehensive concepts (e.g. “failed/failing state”, “state at risk” or “fragile state”), and search for more nuanced and discriminating notions. He identifies four analytical categories that may overlap in some cases but are conceptually distinct.

“Collapsed state” refers to a country whose state apparatus ceases to exist for a period of several months. In this situation, there is a complete breakdown of all services usually provided by the state, such as in Somalia (1991-2004) or in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1991). “Weak state” designates a national context where informal networks and institutions – e.g. tribal, ethnical, community-based networks – have become the main channels of service delivery and allocation of public resources, rather than formal state institutions. “War-torn state” relates to any country confronted with armed conflicts, especially those experiencing extensive civil war that involves most social groups, like in Liberia (2003). Finally, “authoritarian state/regime” applies to a national context where the ruling political elite stays in power through the use of direct coercion and violence, like in Cuba under Castro, Libya under Qaddafi, or North Korea. Each type of situation harbours specific challenges and calls for particular ‘state building’ solutions that may significantly differ from those appropriate to the three other situations.

In 2011, Call proposed an analytical framework that systematically distinguishes three “gaps”, each of them being “a useful lens through which to analyse the challenges faced by the state”. These gaps are not exclusive to each other; they may even sometimes
coincide in the most affected countries, like Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, or Sudan. The “capacity gap” is the first one. It relates to the inability of state institutions to provide or regulate the minimal provision of core public goods. One difficulty, here, arises from the fact that perceptions of a state’s core functions may vary from one national context to the other. The “security gap” refers to a situation where a state is not capable of providing even a minimal level of security against armed groups. It can be assessed through an empirical analysis of various indicators, including the level of armed conflicts, internal forced displacements, social distrust, and human rights abuses. The “legitimacy gap” exists when regime’s rules are rejected by a significant fraction of political elites and society, thus undermining internal legitimacy. As this gap is the most difficult to operationalize, Call proposes to use indicators focusing on the level of free expression and participation.

Contrary to other scholars like Bøås and Jennings, Call is not opposed to state-building interventions of western powers and affiliated international organisations in affected countries. His “three gaps” framework provides new grounds for “strategic responses” to state institutions’ fragilities in areas previously deemed sovereign. He claims that “the implication that the US, the West, or its affiliated organizations may stop their multiple layers of interference in the economies and political life of less powerful countries is a chimera” (2011, p.304). Therefore, Call does not refrain from offering policy recommendations for western interventions in situations marked by the three gaps.

Call’s analytical insights on fragile states are twofold. On the one hand, his definition of fragility is not particularly innovative, as it mainly elaborates on Eizenstadt, Porter and Weinstein’s (2005) three-dimensional analysis of weak states. It also reflects Brinkerhoff’s (2007) distinction between the security, efficiency, and legitimacy dimensions of state fragility in post-conflict societies. It intersects with analytical frameworks elaborated by Stewart and Brown (2009), and by Carment et al. (2010). Stewart and Brown differentiate between failures in authority (a state lacks the authority to protect its citizens from violence of various kinds), in service delivery (a state fails to ensure that all citizens have access to basic services), and in legitimacy (a state has only limited support among the people). Carment et al. analyse fragility in terms of lack of state authority, capacity and legitimacy. Unfortunately one may regret that Call does not discuss – and does not even quote – contributions by Brinkerhoff, Stewart and Brown, Carment et al. On the other hand, Call's key contribution is to insist upon separate analytical treatments of the three dimensions, with distinguishing indicators and specific research assumptions for each of them. “Despite their various interaction effects, these three gaps are conceptually, operationally, and logically distinct. Failing to distinguish among them leads to confused and counterproductive policies” (p. 312). Call’s position clearly differs from Brinkerhoff’s ambition of integrating the various dimensions of fragility into a single, inclusive and comprehensive analytical grid dealing with “governance reconstruction”. He also goes beyond Stewart and Brown’s temptation to take “a broad approach that would encompass all the definitions given thus far”, and to systematically combine the three analytical dimensions with a view to formalizing the results in a single list of fragile states.

D. Carment, S. Press and Y. Samy (2010) belong to a second intellectual trend that considers fragile states to be a compelling area of study. Nevertheless, they thoroughly
criticize the concept's lack of conceptual clarity, and they claim to revise it from an academic perspective. According to them, most scholars rely on description and anecdote in their methods, instead of integrating their insights into a coherent and reproducible theoretical framework. They identify various factors contributing to the lack of coherent theorizing. First, each fragile state being unique, much of the literature is based on specific case studies that do not attempt to generalize insights and to build quality cross-case comparisons. Second, most studies remain policy-oriented, given that they are published or financially supported by governments and international organizations. Therefore scholars usually strive for directly applicable results, meant to satisfy a western policy-audience, at the expense of developing a conceptually well-grounded framework. And thirdly, most academic works tend to focus narrowly on a specific dimension of the problems, such as public organisations’ performance, development, democratization, state theory, conflict prevention, humanitarian interventions, global security, etc.

Carment et al. aspire to build a well-conceptualized approach that “enables comparison across a broad range of cases, and is compatible with positivist research agenda” (p. 6). Their thoughtful analysis of theoretical traditions relevant to the issue of fragile states, and their study of the various dimensions of policy-related research programmes, both stand out as some of the book's important insights, as the authors show the multidimensional and multifaceted analytical treatments of the fragile state problematisation in the academic and policy-related literature (chapter 1). In the fields of economics and political science, they identify three broad research areas: development economics, comparative politics and international relations. Although Carment et al. make reference to dozens of authors who never had recourse to the notion of “fragile state” when looking at poor or unstable countries, they identify a series of intellectual traditions that lay the basis for further empirical work.

In opposition, then, to Call’s request for disaggregating comprehensive notions such as “failed state” and for building a specific set of research assumptions for each conceptual “gap”, Carment et al. insist on the need to “synthesize” the various perspectives and to incorporate them into a single analytical framework. For them, such an integration process is essential for assessing the various factors that contribute to state fragility. At this stage, Carment et al’s analysis, although particularly sophisticated, gives cause for regret. While the solid theoretical foundations explored in the first part of the book show the diversity of intellectual approaches, criteria and methodologies used to process the multiple and complex dimensions of state fragility, the framework proposed by Carment et al. does not consider of the any analytical limitations and pitfalls mentioned above in this paper. The authors take a broad, prescriptive and normative definition of state fragility that is centred on formal state institutions and, more specifically, on the criterion of sovereignty set by international law. Fragility is “a measure of the extent to which the actual institutions, functions, and processes of the state fail to accord with the strong image of a sovereign state, the one reified in both state theory and international law” (p. 76). In this framework, the state is not only the object but also the primary unit of analysis. Such a definition gives priority to state power and state governance as the two main bases for assessing order and stability within society. It also lays particular emphasis on states as central actors around which international relations can stabilize. Although the authors claim that the study of state-society relations is essential to assess the three dimensions of “stateness” (authority, capacity, legitimacy), they do not give any
weight to the study of social groups, civil society organisations, and individuals. And although they acknowledge that the state is “constrained by both internal and external forces”, they also do not put any stress on external dependencies, especially relations to western and emerging countries, to global actors, and to transnational networks. Overall, such a perspective follows the conventional wisdom that state power results in greater social and political order within countries, while amounting to greater security and stability in international relations. Conversely, the fragility of state institutions is associated with higher risks of disorder, security threats, and instability.

Finally, Carment et al. do not refrain from building a new global index of fragile states, based on cross-analysis of more than 80 indicators collected from major research institutions. Fortunately, they do integrate a number of indicator clusters related to economics, human rights, security, health, education, food security, demography, and environment, as part of the assessment of the state capacity. The analytical model presented in the book may help to build comparative analyses among various countries, based on common variables that can be measured and quantified. Nevertheless, the added-value of such a sophisticated model is questionable, as it does not fully explore the various theoretical grounds presented in the first chapter, but rather builds on state-centric views commonly put forward by western governments and affiliated international organisations. It does not lead to any qualitative analysis of “situations of fragility” which might be more contextual, take historical trajectories more seriously, and pay greater attention to social structures, transnational processes, and external interdependencies.

Conclusion

The concepts of fragile and failed state are hindered by conceptual limitations and flawed assumptions that make them deficient and obscure concepts for research. They are shallow, puzzling, and unsteady policy categories circulating between public organizations, policy actors and independent academic researchers, between the field of development and that of security, between international forums and domestic arenas, between major donors and governments of war-torn and poor countries. They are too restrictive as they are based on a state-centric, ahistorical, and decontextualized perspective. At the same time, they are too flexible as they are subject to political manipulations. They are also normative concepts, as they are culturally-specific. They are prescriptive, as western actors have raised them to defend intrusive interventions. Finally, they are useless for policy formulation, given their incapacity to drive effective policy responses to society-wide challenges and large-scale factors that hamper human development and prolong political instability and conflict in the most vulnerable countries.

Everyone agrees that international responses to policy challenges central for the well-being and the security of populations should address the state's institutional capacity or political willingness to perform functions necessary to meet citizens’ basic needs. And everyone concurs policy-oriented concepts are interesting since they might generate academic discussion which in return could help the decision-makers to improve security interventions and aid policies. However, we must abandon simplistic notions that blur the understanding of multifaceted historical situations in so-called fragile countries if we are to avoid new policy failures and to prevent the doctrinal use serving hegemony for
power. From this standpoint, policy actors should renounce externally-driven solutions and support reconstruction and development programmes that are grounded in the society. Such a standpoint involves a greater sensitivity to subnational entities, local stakeholders and a wide array of (potentially conflicting) social structures, such as community groups and clans, private companies, informal economic institutions, cultural and religious actors. It does not assume that the establishment of formal political institutions is a prerequisite for the reconstruction of social and economic structures in all fragile situations. In particular, it requires giving due consideration to the legitimacy and capacity of non state actors who may be efficient providers of security and social services – both in fragmented countries where state institutions have no legitimacy and authority over segments of populations, and in countries where despotic power and corrupted elites may divert resources for development assistance to their advantage. It should also address the regional, transnational and global dimensions of security and development challenges at the level of individual countries, in particular their external dependencies upon expanded criminal networks, hegemonic foreign interference, and the economic markets of the industrialized world.

“Fragile state” and “failed state” are categories on the wane. Like most of the earlier catch-all phrases that attained prominence in the global lexicon on development and security, they are destined to be replaced in the near future. They have already been partially challenged by the notion of “resilient states” in the discourse of international organisations (OECD, 2008; BMZ, 2009). This newer category values the institutional and social experiences that have steered some very poor countries towards peace and stability. Some scholars may hope that the interest in “resilience” may induce western policymakers to abandon technocratic state-building solutions, and to consider local potentials when designing institutional reforms in the fields of development, security and governance (Putzel, 2010). It is certainly not assured, however, that such a change in the policy discourse would drive international organizations and bilateral development actors to favour locally-driven policy solutions putting a greater emphasis on historical, social and transnational factors that affect situations of conflict and poverty.

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