

What defines a state as 'fragile'?

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1. Asking the right questions about fragility

In order to define a state as fragile, we need to think about three related issues: what characterises fragile states; how do we recognise them; and can we 'fix' them. The first of these questions is essentially about the nature of states. An answer to the second question helps us identify indicators for state fragility. The third question engages with the type of responses needed once potential or actual fragility has been established. All three questions are related to each other, but they need to be kept separate analytically and in terms of their policy implications.

2. What characterises fragile states?

A useful prior question to ask is what characterises states. All the classical definitions in international law, political science and sociology rely on the so called 'three-elements doctrine' incorporating government + people + territory. As Max Weber phrased it, "a state is a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." Modern derivatives of Weber's definition commonly emphasise two sources of legitimacy: input legitimacy (elections) and output legitimacy (service provision).

Definitions of fragility vary widely, but generally focus on the output dimension. A fragile state then is one characterised by weak institutions unable to provide basic public goods:

- Of sufficient **quality** (e.g., security, water, healthcare, education, etc.)
- Of sufficient **reach** (across an entire population and/or territory and/or time)
- Of sufficient **scope** (across the whole range of basic public goods)

Put differently, a fragile state is the opposite of a resilient one, i.e., unable to cope with sudden challenges, strains or additional demands on its capacity. From this perspective, fragility is a 'quality' that enables state failure and collapse in the presence of particular triggers, e.g., an environmental disaster or a sudden influx of refugees.

3. How do we recognise fragile states?

Drawing on the characteristics of fragile states established above, recognising them means to look for indicators related to their characteristics. Such indicators can be **predictive** of fragility, and thus enable early warning and early/preventive action, and/or **descriptive** of fragility, thus enabling reaction.

If we examine what **causes** of fragility might be present in a given state, we are able to draw conclusions about the likely *future* severity, direction and kind of fragility. For example, social, political, and/or economic exclusion and discrimination might lead to human flight and/or civil war.

If we look at the **consequences** of fragility, we are able to establish the *current* degree and kind of fragility, as well as its possible direction. For example, civil war would indicate an inability to enforce the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force across the entire territory of a given state and eventually cause the break-up or collapse of the state.

4. Can we 'fix' fragile states?

The distinction between causes and consequences is not just academic. Especially if we are dealing with severe forms of fragility, like state failure and collapse, causes and consequences often form a vicious circle that poses serious challenges for policy. In other words, not only do causes have consequences but consequences, in turn, can also become future causes of ever increasing fragility.

This means that fixing fragile states requires managing consequences, eliminating causes, and watching for triggers. Depending on how severe a degree of fragility characterises a given state, three broad responses are possible, which lead us back to the focus on state institutions. Policy interventions from the outside can thus have three objectives: **strengthening**, **reforming** or **replacing** institutions. These are not mutually exclusive, but often form part of a coherent strategy based on a careful analysis of the indicators of fragility and an assessment of underlying institutional performance.