

Escaping the Fragility Trap? Why is it so hard to think constructively about fragile states?

Duncan Green reviews a new report from the International Growth Centre which examines how countries can escape the trap of fragility.

Just been reading [the report of the 'Commission on Fragility, Growth and Development'](#). Hosted by LSE and Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government; big name chairs ([David Cameron](#), [Donald Kaberuka](#) and the LSE's [Adnan Khan](#)). And I think it's a bit disappointing. But the reasons for that are actually quite interesting and instructive.

First the positives. Above all, the report's recognition and ambition: recognition that fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS) are the hardest nut to crack in development, and require all the brainpower and resources possible. Ambition, in that it reckons the nut can indeed be cracked.

It has some good overall instincts, setting out in the foreword that 'what works' in FCAS is 'Realism, not idealism; Local, not international priorities; Reconciliation first, not elections first and Working with governments not around governments and Institution building and nation building.' [Paul Collier's influence](#) shows in its sensible reminder that forcing countries emerging from conflict to run early elections can do more harm than good.

They do the traditional take-down of previous attempts to fix FCAS from outside, arguing that 'received wisdom has accumulated via three different processes: quick reactions to the crises inherent to fragility; imagining that fragility has a single root cause that can be addressed by international intervention or domestic resolution; and inferring strategy for the escape from fragility from the current characteristics of Western democracies.'



Women protest in the city center against President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term. Credit: Igor Rugwiza Photography via Flickr(https://flic.kr/p/t6P2YW_)

So good instincts and diagnosis, although there is a tendency to set up (and knock down) straw men rather than acknowledge current debates and shifts in donor thinking – other [reviewers have found little new](#) in the report. In fact, there is a lot of rethinking going on – the kind of things I discussed last year in a [paper on donor theories of change in FCAS](#).

The report gets in a tangle over the role of the state: ‘Only governments can lift societies out of fragility’, it declares and sets out recommendations for ‘viable strategies for national leaders wishing to begin the escape from fragility’. But what if the government is either absent, or predatory? In time-honoured policy wonk fashion, it appears to be [assuming a can opener](#) – in this case a government that is willing and to some extent able to fix things, and which needs some help from outside. Which then allows them to set forth some sensible recommendations for that government, both on political reform and economic policy.

Here are the headline recommendations: when you’re reading them, ask yourselves, ‘what are the chances of this working in Syria, Yemen, Somalia or South Sudan?’

For International Actors:

- Help build government that is subject to checks and balances and works for common purpose
- Help build domestic security, including through a phase of international and regional security
- Capitalise on pivotal moments
- Focus on economic governance, not policies
- Use aid to support private investment for job creation
- Adopt distinctive international financial institution (IFI) policies for fragile states
- Use international means of building resilience

For Domestic Actors:

- Establish limited and purposive long-term goals
- In the short-term, look for quick wins
- Build institutions to support the private economy
- Invest in urban infrastructure for energy and connectivity
- Use domestic means of building resilience

The Commission was hosted at [LSE’s International Growth Centre](#), but no-one from the International Development department (where I work) was involved, and I think it shows: the literature on the politics and political economy of FCAS is strikingly absent: no mentions of some of its leading current thinkers, as featured regularly on this blog: [Sue Unsworth](#), [David Booth](#), [Brian Levy](#) or [Matt Andrews](#). Even within the LSE, no mention of some of the relevant big name professors – [James Putzel](#), [Mary Kaldor](#), [Alex de Waal](#) or [David Keen](#), all of whom have written extensively on crisis states and conflict.

Nor of the work of two highly relevant research initiatives – the [Crisis States Research Network](#) and [CPAID](#) (where I do one day a week). The report also fails to acknowledge all the practical experience accumulating within [PDIA](#), [Doing Development Differently](#) or the [Thinking and Working Politically](#) communities.

Instead it looks for lessons from countries like Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia, which took off after magically acquiring a tin opener in the shape of a nation-building authoritarian government led by a Kagame or a Meles.

But what can outsiders (or domestic reformers) do, absent a providential, well intentioned and powerful leader? That for me is the most interesting, and urgent question, and I think if they had asked more of the researchers named above, they might have got more interesting answers. Options include:

1. Nothing. Accept that official aid donors in particular are helpless to work in contexts where their principal ally, the state, is not onside. When a Meles or Kagame appears, drop everything and rush to both help them transform the economy, and try to nudge them away from authoritarianism (not easy, I realise).
2. Hybrid institutions/Working with the Grain. Invest in understanding the institutions, both formal and informal, that exist in a given context, and find solutions that involve and strengthen them. See ODI’s great work on [educational reforms in West Africa](#) for more on that, or Brian Levy’s [Working with the Grain](#).
3. Pockets of Effectiveness: look beyond the presidential palace, to identify ministries, municipalities, bits of the judiciary or other fragments of the state that are still functioning and could be viable partners.
4. Look beyond the state altogether: tricky for official donors, but there is a whole world of ‘[public authority](#)’ held by non-state actors like traditional chiefs, faith leaders, civil society organisations or private sector bodies, that can be brought together to trigger processes of social and economic change.

Any other suggestions?

This article was first published on the [From Poverty to Power blog](#).

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