



FRAGILITY, THE CHALLENGE OF OUR CENTURY

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Fragility is one of the most significant challenges of our century. This is central for donors such as Belgium, a country which has chosen to concentrate its development cooperation on fragile contexts. This article explores the principles of the fragility approach to development cooperation – a long known concept. A core question is why have we not been able to mitigate fragility, even in the slightest way? The answer is simple: we have been sprinkling insufficient amounts of Official Development Assistance (ODA) on massive and complex challenges.

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The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) offers a broad definition of fragility as the combination of exposure to risks and the insufficient adaptive capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks.¹ At the global level, fragility represents one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century, which has only increased with the COVID-19 global pandemic.

According to the 2018 OECD biannual report "States of Fragility," there are 58 fragile states in the world, 17 of which are "chronically fragile" (they have been considered fragile since 2008) and 15 of which are said to be "extremely

fragile." Not surprisingly, fragile states are far behind other countries in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among the 157 countries for which data on SDGs are available, fragile states consistently fall in the bottom third of the ranking.²

Of fragile states' many daunting challenges, a particularly worrying one is the expected demographic explosion.³ Half of the world's population growth over the next few decades will take place in only nine countries, six of

which are fragile states.⁴ These countries are often the first victims of climate change and soil fragility, which could translate into major problems with food security for growing populations. OECD estimates that the proportion of people living in extreme poverty (on less than \$1.90 per day) will increase in 40 out of 58 fragile states by 2030. This was before the outbreak of COVID-19. Without major and useful interventions, 80% of people living in extreme poverty will be living in fragile contexts by 2030⁵.

THE FRAGILITY APPROACH: AN IMPERATIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

If the SDGs are to be achieved, the development community must act fast to address the specific challenges of development cooperation in fragile contexts. This is particularly true for Belgium, the ninth largest donor worldwide to fragile states as a percentage of gross national income (GNI).⁶ This is a direct result of its long-standing commitment to focus its development cooperation on the least developed countries and fragile states. Indeed, of Belgium's 14 partner countries, 11 are fragile states.

But how can Belgium – or any donor – better adapt its development cooperation to the reality of these countries? While there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution, let us recall five principles particularly crucial to development cooperation in fragile contexts.

1. *Work on the root causes of fragility*

A donor country's development cooperation in fragile contexts must first analyse and work on the root causes of fragility, rather than their consequences. Where needed, it must promote **conflict prevention** by setting up early warning and early action systems. This is likely to include promoting solutions to problems over access to land and natural resources, common causes of tension and conflict. The Pathways to Peace study by the World Bank and the United Nations has shown that conflict prevention can bring significant economic benefits: between \$5 billion and 70 billion USD per year of aid could be saved worldwide.⁷

Work on the causes of fragility should also include an increase in the financing of **structural development cooperation**, aimed at building long-term resilience rather than averting short-term crises. However, in recent years this form of aid has decreased in contrast to increasing levels of humanitarian aid. Indeed, in just one year (2015-2016), global

humanitarian aid rose by 38% to reach an all-time high of US\$18.3 billion. This trend could be viewed as a positive development, as humanitarian aid is necessary in crises caused by fragility. But this increase was not matched by a rise in programmable development assistance.⁸ As the OECD states, "the trend of aid increasingly being used for stopgap "firefighting" [...] but ultimately prolonged humanitarian purposes, rather than for longer-term development, is worryingly inconsistent with visions for sustaining peace and sustainable development."⁹ The OECD adds: "In fragile contexts especially, the international community should thus adopt the overarching principle of development programming and financing wherever possible and humanitarian assistance only when necessary."¹⁰

2. Strengthening the rule of law must be the fundamental objective of development programming

Development cooperation in fragile states must have **strengthening of the rule of law** as one of its fundamental objectives. This involves continuously promoting the principle of national ownership. A priority for Belgian cooperation must therefore be the strengthening of governance institutions. This approach will contribute to an effective, legitimate and resilient state based on democratic principles and capable of providing services such as security, justice, health and education to all citizens.

Strengthening relations between the state and its citizens is a priority. Fundamental to this goal is the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as the foundation of the rule of law. To this end, the protection and strengthening of civil society actors is essential, since they play essential roles in fragile states:

(1) Defending democratic principles and citizens' rights by obliging their institutions to respect their obligations; (2) Acting as a counterweight, helping to democratise relations between state and society and the strengthening of good governance; (3) Maintaining a good knowledge of the context to help external actors to intervene effectively in fragile situations; (4) Acting, if possible temporarily, in a way that complements the state when the latter does not have the capacity to do so.

3. Flexible cooperation committed to the long term

Development cooperation with fragile states must be **long-term**. The OECD emphasizes the importance of long-term engagement:

"Patience and long-term commitment to support true generational change may take as many as 20 to 40 years, according to development bank estimates [...]. Expecting more profound and faster change in the most challenging environments, and with less time and fewer tailored resources, is the ultimate fool's errand of the development sector. Yet it is one that is undertaken with surprising frequency".¹¹

Long-term cooperation in fragile contexts must be **flexible** and able to adapt to changing contexts. While multi-annual budgets are preferred, there also should be clear procedures to reallocate aid to non-governmental or multilateral channels when deemed necessary. This flexibility allows the donor country to remain engaged if relations with the recipient country government become difficult. For example, reallocations of funds could be made to respond to significant human rights violations rather than suspending or

stopping bilateral development cooperation. This way, local populations do not suffer a double penalty: already denied good governance, they would not also be deprived of the development aid they were promised.

4. Starting from the local context

A prior analysis of risks and structural vulnerabilities is an essential first step. Any donor working in fragile states needs to understand the local, national and regional causes of fragility and the factors that can strengthen peace and stability. Challenges and priorities in terms of state building must also be identified. An overall analysis of the context - the political economy, risks and institutional capacities must also be conducted.

Broad consultations can help donors to identify and **understand the priorities of local populations** as well as those of the government of the partner country. This approach can help development cooperation to respect the principles of alignment and ownership, as outlined in the 2011 Busan Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011) and Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), which state that development cooperation must be aligned with local development priorities, not with the interests of donor countries themselves. This requires that views of civil society actors, particularly women, are integrated into development cooperation programmes, as well as into decisions on the programmes and projects to be implemented.

5. Internal and external coherence

Any donor engaging in fragile contexts must ensure both internal and external coordination. Internally, the principle of **policy coherence for development (PCD)** must guide the full range of external policies, as it is essential for any intervention in a fragile context. Indeed, PCD requires at a minimum that all of a donor's external policies do not thwart the objectives of development co-operation.

Externally, it is crucial that all donors coordinate with each other at the global level. Indeed, donors must first align themselves with the priorities of their partners, and then ensure that their respective actions are **harmonised** with other international actors. This is very important as there is currently an asymmetry in the allocation of aid in fragile states: in 2016, 74% of the ODA allocated to fragile states was concentrated in only 20 countries. Of these, 10 countries received 50% of ODA allocated to fragile states: they are commonly referred to as "aid darlings".¹²

6. So why are we still talking about this?

The fragility approach is not new, nor are the five priorities outlined above. Researchers Lamb and Mixon have identified 15 good practices on fragility that have been repeated in publications for more than six decades. Of these, ten were already included in a World Bank report dated 1949.¹³

So why are we still talking about fragility? Why has the international community not been able to mitigate fragility, even in the slightest way? Why have we not sufficiently put these principles into practice? Why do we repeatedly invent new concepts instead, ones which have

the same objectives of increasing aid and development effectiveness in fragile contexts, such as the “comprehensive approach”, or the “whole-of-government” approach, the double nexus, the triple nexus, etc?

It seems no matter how many concepts we come up with, no matter how many times we repeat the same principles in the fragility approach – which remain completely valid of course – the truth is: the international donor community is tackling the world’s biggest challenge with totally insufficient means.

Of course, issues of fragility are extremely challenging and complex for an external donor. One cannot engineer solutions to fragility many of which are highly political and rooted in global structural relationships whose reform are urgently needed but well beyond the power of middle level donors such as Belgium. Still, the reality of what is being done, versus what is needed, is daunting.

7. Sprinkling ODA on the world's biggest challenge

With the sanitary, economic and financial crises accentuated by the pandemic, fragility is likely increasing. According to the World Bank, 100 million additional people will fall into extreme poverty in 2020 because of the coronavirus.¹⁴ At the same time, the public debt of developing countries (domestic and external) has gone from 100% to 193% of their GDP from 2008 to 2019.¹⁵

Added to these worsening conditions is the well-known financing gap for the SDGs. Before the global pandemic struck, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that developing countries would need \$2.5 trillion of additional funding

per year to achieve the SDGs.¹⁶ Prior to COVID, fragile states were on track to achieve only one of the 17 SDGs by 2030. Their progress was already challenged on critical SDGs related to hunger, health, and gender equality.¹⁷ The global pandemic greatly diminishes the possibilities for future progress.

In the face of such huge needs, the \$150 billion of annual ODA is obviously insufficient. Given the current situation, it is unrealistic to expect that the SDGs in fragile contexts can be achieved by 2030. ODA is being sprinkled on top of gigantic and very complex challenges, while the donor community paradoxically questions ODA’s effectiveness more and more.

8. Increased ODA: an imperative to tackle fragility

ODA is no “silver bullet”, no miracle worker. It is also but one of the many financial flows worldwide. And while it is equally important to promote the mobilisation of domestic resources, remittances, or the end of tax havens, ODA remains a unique and crucial public resource, one that is essential as a catalyst for reducing poverty, inequality and fragility and thus the realization of the SDGs. ODA has a primary commitment to transforming the lives of people affected by fragility and ensuring that no one is left behind. It can be invested directly in strengthening the rule of law and the foundations of peace and stability. It has the capacity to temporarily fill the financing gaps of states that are unable to mobilise sufficient domestic revenue for their basic social services. ODA can directly target the most vulnerable people and thus combat inequalities that generate fragility.

According to the OECD, ODA is crucial: “for all fragile contexts, aid is the only flow that

can catalyse reform and support resilient foundations that other flows can then reinforce and help build upon".¹⁸ OECD recognizes that it will be many years before other financing options are available.¹⁹ And while the effectiveness of development assistance is undeniably important, it is imperative that there be sufficient and predictable financial resources to support long-term development strategies.

9. Recommendations to the Belgian Government

In order to implement the five principles outlined above, Belgian cooperation must equip itself with instruments adapted to the

reality of fragile states. Among them, official development assistance is in first place. A growth plan will thus have to be defined to increase Belgium's ODA, so that it meets its commitment to allocate 0.7% of GNI to ODA as soon as possible.

The additional funding this would provide should be allocated to the priority areas of the fragility approach outlined above, with a particular focus on strengthening the rule of law, supporting local civil society and conflict prevention in ways that understand and work with the local context, taking into account the need to align development strategies with the priorities of the populations, including women in particular.

ENDNOTES

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