

# Analysing donor conceptualisations of state fragility



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## Abstract

This paper analyses how international development organisations conceptualise and operationalise the concept of state fragility. We identify two principal dimensions within donors' definitions of state fragility: one distinguishes between a focus on development outcomes such as poverty reduction and the legitimacy of the government while the other differentiates conflict and security from the capacity of the state.

## Key Words

State fragility

Education

Measurement

Multi-dimensional scaling

## Introduction

The rise of state fragility as a framework for understanding the role of the state in development processes has been well-documented and well-studied (Bertoli and Ticci, 2012; Jones and Rodgers, 2011; Nay, 2010). Most of this literature lends credence to Grimm's (2014: 252) observation that 'there are significant variations in how various donor governments and international agencies define 'state fragility' and in which countries they include in their lists of 'fragile' states'. Thus, while it is widely acknowledged that international development agencies define and measure state fragility in different ways, the ways in which various conceptualisations and measurements relate to one another remain largely uncharted. Given that the conceptualisation and measurement of fragility holds direct influence over how donors distribute funding (for example in the World Bank's International Development Association Resource Allocation Index, World Bank, 2018), understanding these variations in greater depth is a clear priority for international development research.

The purpose of this paper is to better understand how state fragility is conceptualised and operationalised by international development organisations. To achieve this goal, it employs a mixed methods analysis of 1) textual definitions of fragility taken from the extensive literature produced by development organisations and 2) indices used by these organisations as measures of fragility. Both of these data sources are analysed using multidimensional scaling, which creates a conceptual space that demonstrates similarities between definitions and measurements and establishes key organising dimensions of the fragility discourse. The results of the analysis are used to identify key

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dimensions that organise the ways in which donors understand fragility. It is hoped that the exploratory analysis presented here will be used as a framework for empirical studies that relate these dimensions of fragility to development outcomes.

## Literature review

State fragility terminology first emerged in the years following the 9/11 attacks mainly in relation to Western donor concerns about the security risks posed by countries with unstable, or authoritarian governments and a history of violent conflict (e.g. Afghanistan and Iraq). However, the concept draws upon a longer tradition dating back to concerns about 'failed' states following the Cold War and the implicit nation-building goals in modernisation approaches to development (Call, 2011; Marquette and Beswick, 2011). The fragility terminology grew in prominence in the decade that followed 9/11, spurred by the first publication of the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) - which was quickly appropriated as a measure of fragility (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, 2008) - and a good deal of 'grey literature' that situated the concept of fragility squarely in donors' agendas (Nay, 2010: 327).

Much of the literature from development organisations has at its core an understanding of fragility as 'institutional deficits that permit repeated cycles of violence' (World Bank, 2011: 22), with the idea that the two phenomena (fragility and violent conflict) arise through mutual causation and feedback cycles. Other commonly cited features of fragile states include a lack of security, an inability to meet the basic needs of the population, 'horizontal inequalities' and ethnic tensions, and poor use of development funding (Davies, 2011, Stewart and Brown, 2010; François and Sud, 2006). By providing examples of the large number of people living in countries defined as fragile and their disproportionate share of development problems (e.g. poverty, limited access to education, etc.), fragility is constructed as a pressing concern and implicitly positioned as a cause of these problems (e.g. OECD, 2014; USAID, 2014; World Bank, 2011).

However, beyond this common core, there exists considerable divergence in how development organisations understand fragility; Cammack et al (2006) highlight how definitions of fragility range from understanding fragility in terms of 'functions

of the state', 'outputs' of fragility (e.g. poverty and violence) and as a relationship with donors'. The concept has been further muddled through its conflation with conflict, with common phrases such as 'fragile and conflict-affected' often implying that the two phenomena are one and the same. The concept is also weakened by the wide variety of ideas and contexts it seeks to incorporate, almost paradoxically spanning very weak states - those with failing governments and lack of territorial control (e.g. Somalia)- and very strong states - those with authoritarian control and no democratic accountability (e.g. North Korea).

Due to these conceptual shortcomings, the concept of fragility has attracted criticism from academic research, mainly focusing on its weakness as an analytic concept and framework for understanding states' development (Bertoli and Ticci, 2012; Binkerhoff, 2014; Nay 2010, Paulson and Shields, 2015). These critiques approach the topic from a number of different angles: some studies accept the overall conceptual premises of state fragility - or at least parts of it - but critique the way it has been defined and implemented, often suggesting reforms or posing alternatives. For example, research has suggested alternative approaches to measuring and classifying fragile states (e.g. Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, 2008; Grävingholt et al, 2012).

In contrast, other studies reject the concept of fragility as a form of discursive power and control that primarily serves the interests of international organisations and/or developed countries (Nay, 2010). In line with Fairclough's (1995: 2) view that power lies in the ability 'sustain particular discursive practices with particular ideological investments in dominance over other alternative practices', international development donors are able to promote and maintain representations of 'fragile states' as deficient and in need of interventions, consistent with Escobar's (1995) larger critique of discursive power in international development. Taking this critique further, the fragility discourse silences and obscures the global and the geopolitical power dynamics, from colonial legacies to neocolonial development practices, that sustain and perpetuate poverty and conflict (Nay, 2010).

From this perspective, quantitative measurements of fragility, taking the form of indices and rankings published by numerous international development agencies and think tanks (e.g. the World Bank's

CPIA and Brookings Institute's Index of State Weakness), also form a part of the fragility discourse. In line with the assertions of Said (1978) and Escobar (1995) that the production of knowledge and establishment of new fields of study (e.g. 'orientalism', area studies, development economics, etc.) was essential to colonial regimes, these measurements confer a pseudo-scientific status and appearance of objectivity to the fragility discourse in a neo-colonial order in which the funding mechanisms of international organisations are a key form of power. Quantitative studies of the indices themselves provide a nuanced understanding of these measurements, revealing that correlations between indices, which purport to measure the same thing, actually range from 0.10 to 0.94 (Mata and Ziaja, 2009). This variation suggests that the measurement constructs and the underlying understandings of fragility employed by respective organisations are inconsistent. Nevertheless, fragility measurements are used to determine significant allocations of development funding, often through complex formulas in which initial measurements based on 'minor bureaucratic practice' are transformed and decontextualised (Siqueria, 2014).

However, despite the healthy levels of criticism, there is also a good deal of literature that accepts and reproduces the general assumptions of the discourse (e.g. the co-constitutive problem of weak institutions, violent conflict and poor development outcomes), and has played a key role in legitimising the discourse on state fragility (Nay, 2010). In many academic studies, state fragility and its measurement are accepted as objective fact, with the assumption that one can define a state as fragile just as easily as one can determine it is landlocked. Others temper critique of how fragility is understood, defined and measured among development donors with cautious optimism that the concept holds some potential to explain development outcomes and inform policy (Ipke, 2007; Patrick, 2007). From this perspective, the potential of fragility as concept is limited with the realisation that 'current definitions of fragility are not useful aggregations to predict, monitor and explain development progress using MDG indicators' (Harttgen and Klassen, 2013: 134). Thus, in order to arrive at a more fruitful, relevant and conceptually valid understanding of state fragility, scrutiny and careful analysis of existing definitions of

fragility is necessary. In this study, we share a critical orientation to the emergence of a fragility discourse and its functions of maintaining geopolitical power dynamics by locating the causes of conflict and poverty in the 'fragile' states of the global south. We also share the commitment to careful analysis of existing definitions, less as an effort to rescue the conceptual validity of fragility and more as an endeavour to better understand the features of the fragility discourse, including its inconsistencies, and to present a framework with which future research might critically the mobilisation of fragility discourses.

## Methods

In order to better understand how international development organisations conceptualise and operationalise state fragility, we undertook a mixed methods study of how the concept of state fragility is defined in these organisations' literature, and the indicators that development organisations use to measure fragility. This study uses codings of fragility definitions to create a conceptual mapping of how these organisations understand state fragility by using multidimensional scaling (MDS), a technique for exploratory analysis of multivariate data.

We analysed definitions of state fragility produced by international development organisations. These definitions are taken from documents that are authored and published by the organisations and contain a clear and explicit definition of fragility. The organisations include bilateral donors (e.g. DFID, USAID), publications from their respective governments, multilateral donors (e.g. the World Bank) and multilateral organisations that coordinate work among donors (i.e. OECD). We do not include research reports commissioned by the organisations, academic research papers, or documents from non-governmental organisations and charities. In total, we analysed 17 definitions from 8 organisations, spanning the years 2002 to 2014 (Table 1); ranging from 17 to 113 words in length. These definitions were coded using a set of codes created on the basis of the literature review and preliminary review of the definitions (a list of codes and their frequencies is included in the online appendix). We coded each definition using a literal approach, in which a code was applied to a given definition only if the actual text – or a close variation thereof – appeared in the given definition.

Organization	Year	Document Title
AusAID	2011	Framework for working in fragile and conflict-affected states
DFID	2004	Fragile states: Defining difficult environments for poverty reduction
DFID	2005	Why we need to work more effectively in fragile states
EU	2007	An EU response to situations of fragility
GIZ	2012	The Challenge of fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa
Netherlands (Foreign Ministry)	2008	Dutch Security and Development in Fragile States
OECD-DAC	2006	Whole of government approaches to fragile states
OECD-DAC	2007	Principles for good international engagement in fragile states and situations
OECD-DAC	2008	Concepts and dilemmas of state building in fragile situations: From fragility to resilience
OECD-DAC	2010	The state's legitimacy in fragile situations: Unpacking complexity
OECD-DAC	2013	Fragile states 2013: Resource flows and trends in a shifting world
USAID	2005	Measuring fragility: Indicators and methods for rating state performance
USAID	2014	Ending extreme poverty in fragile contexts
USDoS	2008	Weak and Failing States: Evolving Security Threats and U.S. Policy
World Bank (WB)	2005	Fragile states: Good practice in country assistance strategies
World Bank (WB)	2007a	Global monitoring report 2007
World Bank (WB)	2007b	Aid that works: Successful development in fragile states

Table 1: Source documents for definitions

The coded definitions were transformed into a similarity matrix - a table in which each cell represents the distance between a pair of definitions or measurements. For definitions, the similarity is based on the number of common codes the definitions share<sup>1</sup>. The similarity matrix was then transformed into a two-dimensional Euclidean space using classical multidimensional scaling (MDS). The MDS algorithm creates a space with a

structure that most closely resembles the similarity matrix, such that definitions or measurements that are most similar are closest to one another. The space can then be analysed to find patterns of clustering (i.e groups of similar institutions) as well as organising dimensions – continua along which definitions and measurements are spread, which vary independently of one another (Everitt and Hothorn, 2011).

<sup>1</sup>This is calculated using a distance function, so common codings (i.e. both coded with a give code or both not coded with a given code) are considered closer, while differing codings (one coded while the other is not) are coded differently. This compensates that some definitions have more codes than others, often due to the differing lengths.

It is important to keep in mind that this space represents definitions of fragility and not states themselves; there is no claim that individual states can or should be interpreted as representing particular points in our conceptual space. The focus of our analysis therefore differs from other studies that apply latent variable analysis to state fragility (i.e. Grävingholt et al, 2012), which focus on identifying clusters of similar countries based on a range of indicators. While both approaches illustrate the affordance of understanding fragility as a latent variable - i.e. a construct that is not directly measured but observed through multiple indicators – they address different but related research questions. Once analysed, the conceptual spaces provide a useful framework for understanding the organizing principles and dimensions in donors' approaches to measuring and operationalising state fragility.

## Findings

Results from the analysis of fragility definitions are shown in Figure 1. Several interesting features emerge from a general overview: First, there is a general tendency for organisations' definitions to cluster relatively close to one another. For example, definitions from the World Bank are grouped together in the middle of the figure, while those from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of State (USDoS) are towards the bottom of the figure. While this is not surprising, it is in establishing the validity of the analysis. There are also chronological patterns: the OECD's definitions

from 2007 and 2008 are located in the centre of the figure, while more recent definitions (2010 and 2013) are towards the upper right. This change indicates a conceptual shift - primarily through the adoption of 'resilience' into the definition of fragile states.

Finally, one the most commonly cited definitions of fragility – from the OECD-DAC 2007, is located relatively close to a large number of other definitions (interestingly – some of which precede it chronologically). This clustering is good evidence of a strong 'consensus' that –

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 population.  
(OECD/DAC 2007: 2)

Focusing on the distribution of codes across conceptual space, provides further insight into the key dimensions to differences in organisations' understandings of state fragility.

## Development outcomes versus social contract perspectives

One key dimension to the analysis is the distinction between definitions that focus on development outcomes (coded with 'aid resources' and 'poverty reduction') and those that are concerned with aspects of the social contract between the state and its citizens (coded with 'state-society relations' and 'legitimacy'). As shown in Figure 2, earlier definitions,

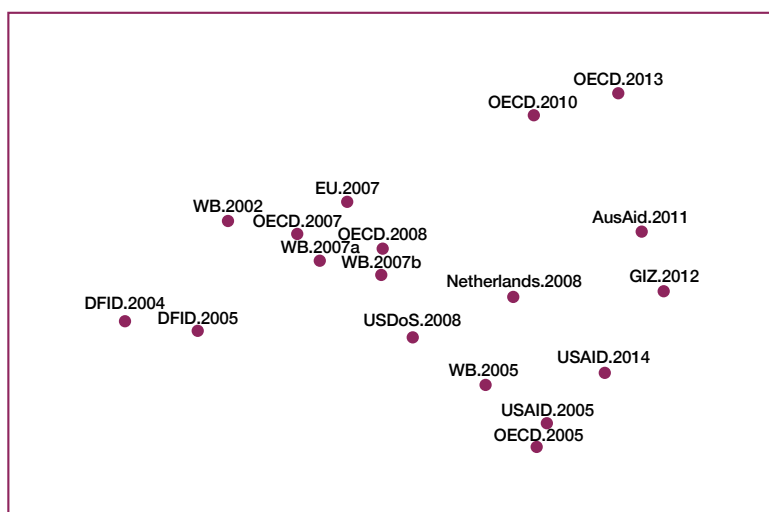


Figure 1: Conceptual mapping of state fragility definitions

particularly those from the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development, were primarily concerned with development outcomes, whereas, more recent definitions, including those from other national donors, focus more on the legitimacy of the government and its relationship to citizens, often using the concept of a social contract.

### Functions and capacity versus conflict, peace and security

Another key dimension to the analysis is the distinction between the functions and capacity

of the state (i.e. its ability to deliver services and maintain a social contract) versus issues related to conflict, peace and security. This is illustrated along the vertical axis of the conceptual space, and the groups indicated in Figure 3 show those definitions that utilise these perspectives as well an overlap in which definitions use both sets. Particularly noticeable in these groupings are those more recent definitions from the OECD, which focus on the concept of resilience as a counterpoint to fragility.

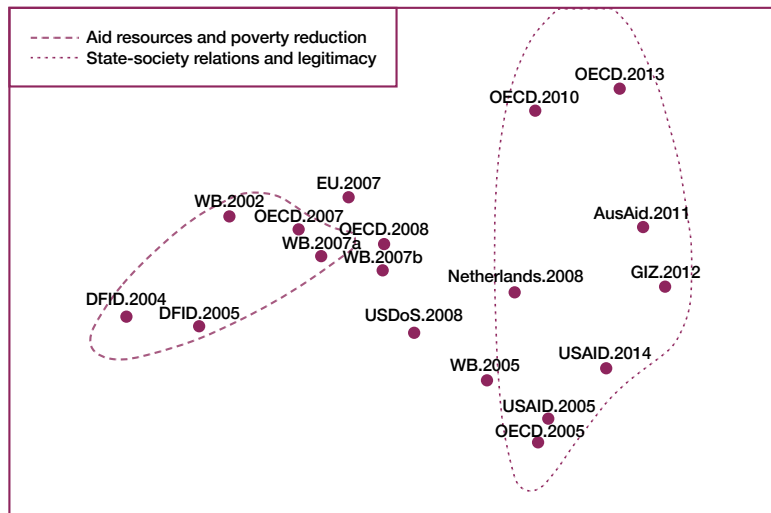


Figure 2: The horizontal dimension distinguishes between development outcomes and the social contract

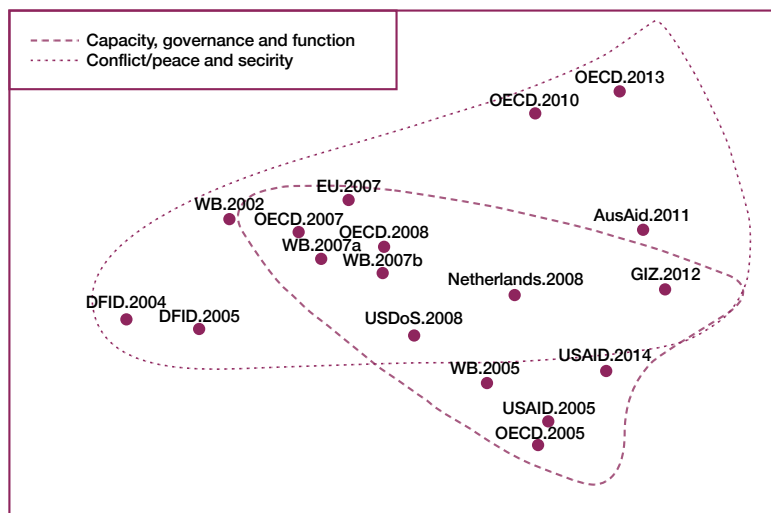


Figure 2: The vertical dimension differentiates between capacity of the state and conflict

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper has analysed how state fragility is defined among international development donors. It was motivated by literature that showed how state fragility is ambiguously defined and how different definitions have political implications. Through an exploratory and inductive analysis, we have highlighted two primary distinctions in how state fragility is defined: one between poverty reduction and state functions, and another between state capacity and security. These dimensions provide a framework for thinking about state fragility, and it could be used to contextualise particular definitions or to analyse donor policy and funding in greater detail. The paper therefore contributes to future research on fragility by showing the differences in specific meanings it may hold; it contributes to policy and programming on fragile states by offering a framework for thinking about what the concept of fragility might mean in a more concrete sense.

However, these dimensions do not establish which of these understandings is more valid or useful. On the contrary, because definitions vary across this conceptual space, our analysis highlights the ambiguity inherent in the concept of state fragility, and where such ambiguity exists there is an opening for politicisation. Donors, aid recipients, and other actors in the education sector may discursively and rhetorically position themselves strategically within this space depending on their political and financial agendas. Careful consideration of such manoeuvring may provide greater insight into the political economy of aid and its relationship to conflict and education.

## Author Bios

### Robin Shields

Robin's research investigates the globalization of education, using quantitative methods to examine global trends in educational policy and practice. He has worked across a number of different contexts and topics, including privatization of education in South Asia, education and conflict, and international higher education.

### Julia Paulson

Julia's research focuses on education, peace and conflict. She works to understand the ways in which educational transformation and change might contribute towards peace and justice by understanding and seeking to repair past injustices. Her research focuses on relationships between education and transitional justice, education and memory production, and education about difficult pasts. I am interested in knowledge production and the ethics of collaborative research in education in emergencies.



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