



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

Fragile States and Fragile Cities

Executive Summary

Nearly 1.2 billion people live in fragile states, including one-third of the world's poor. Fragile states are vulnerable to internal and external shocks, including armed conflict. Of the world's thirty-seven ongoing armed conflicts in 2011, more than twenty were in fragile states. Challenges emerging from fragile states, such as transnational threats, regional spillovers, and local insecurity and underdevelopment require the attention of multilateral institutions.

More recently, cities have emerged as a new category of fragility in the security and development landscape. With unprecedentedly fast urbanization rates, cities are becoming the focal point of global poverty, conflict, and vulnerability to disasters—particularly when situated within a fragile state. Urban fragility can be seen as the extent to which urban systems are susceptible to damage incurred by shocks, with urban systems including not only infrastructure and ecological systems but also social, economic, and political systems.

Although no internationally agreed upon definition of fragile states exists, limited institutional capacity and weak governance are evident as main factors of fragility. While the early concept of fragility was dominated by security preoccupations, recent research on causes of civil war and intrastate armed conflict highlights the importance of weak institutions as the key structural cause that—particularly in combination with political and economic exclusion—create the conditions for conflict and violence. Despite its limitations, the concept of fragility has enhanced the linkage not just among international, national, and human security, but also among security, development, and governance needs, including issues of food, water, health, and environment.

Two new trends in “fragility” are emerging. First, although fragile states are often seen as a relatively narrow set of low-income, mainly sub-Saharan African, countries affected by conflict, a new understanding of fragility goes beyond fragile states, opting for the concept “states of fragility,” which assesses fragility as an issue of universal character that can affect all countries. Second, there is a new appetite among donors to start grappling with some of the broader dynamics of fragility going beyond the nature and boundaries of states, whether it is urban violence, the links between criminality and development, violent extremism, or other societal dynamics. At the same time, there is a growing

recognition that fragile states are not only the result of endogenous “incapacities,” but, as part of the international system, they are also subject to pressures from external factors, such as global economic downturns or climate change, which also determine their relative fragility or resilience.

The international response to fragile states affected by conflict remains peacekeeping. UN humanitarian agencies also address fragility; however, the UN’s impact varies widely, with greater impact in smaller and poorer countries. When it comes to development, the UN is disproportionately concentrated in postconflict fragile states. Remittances have been consistently the largest source of external finance to fragile states, followed by Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). However, these financial flows are very unequally distributed. Regional development banks are another source of initiatives to strengthen fragile states.

When it comes to the response to fragile cities, it is hard to summarize the many initiatives at municipal level. UN-HABITAT remains at the forefront of the multilateral system’s responses to urban fragility. The nonprofit sector, both think tanks and civil society organizations, have contributed greatly, not only to a better understanding of the dynamics of urban fragility but also with projects aimed to engage local communities in urban violence reduction, humanitarianism, and development.

Yet important shortcomings persist in the United Nations and the multilateral system at large to make it fit for the purpose of addressing fragility and building resilience in both fragile states and cities. These gaps are conceptual and analytical; institutional; financial; engagement-related; and gender and youth-related. The following recommendations seek to address these gaps and make the system fit for improved responses to fragility:

- 1) Go beyond labeling countries as “fragile” and focus on a “3Rs” approach of risk assessment, resilience building, and robust processes.
- 2) Review the UN’s multiple peace and security institutions, mandates, funds, missions, and offices, in a holistic manner with an eye toward simplification and mergers.
- 3) Develop “Glocal Compacts” with multi-stakeholder strategies and pooled fund mechanisms.
- 4) Launch the annual Global Mayors Forum at the time of the opening of the General Assembly in New York to allow mayors to interact with national leaders at the global level.
- 5) The views and perspectives of women and youth should be sought out and systematically integrated into system wide responses to fragility.