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## Research Report

# Constellations of state fragility: Improving international cooperation through analytical differentiation

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## Constellations of State Fragility: Improving International Cooperation through Analytical Differentiation

Jasmin Lorch, Sebastian Ziaja & Jörn Grävingholt

### Summary

State fragility has remained a pressing challenge for international security and development policymakers for more than two decades. However, international engagement in fragile states has often failed, in part due to a lack of understanding about what constitutes state fragility. Established quantitative models usually rank fragile states on one-dimensional scales ranging from stable to highly fragile. This puts states characterised by very different problems and dimensions of fragility into the same “box”. Moreover, categorisations such as “fragile”, “weak”, “failed” or “collapsed” are increasingly rejected in the Global South, thereby hampering international development and security cooperation.

The “Constellations of State Fragility” model, developed at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), provides a more differentiated model to measure state fragility. It assesses state fragility along three continuous dimensions, assuming that state fragility is a continuous trait that affects all states to some degree: authority, capacity and legitimacy. These dimensions are not aggregated into a one-dimensional index. Instead, the model detects typical constellations across these dimensions. In so doing, it also accounts for the fact that states can perform very differently in different dimensions.

Our analysis yields three main insights about what constitutes state fragility and how it can be addressed: first, state fragility, illiberalism, repression and human rights violations are interrelated; second, state fragility is not unique to the Global South, with negative trends also occurring in the Global North; and, third, differentiated, multi-dimensional models offer better starting points for addressing state fragility than one-dimensional ones.

We conclude with four policy recommendations:

- *Improve analytical capacity by adopting a differentiated view of state fragility:* International security and development policymakers would benefit from more fine-grained, differentiated assessments of state fragility. In addition, country-specific assessments of the specific local power constellations in which fragile state institutions are embedded are needed for devising adequate, context-sensitive measures.
- *Connect measures to address fragility with democracy protection and the protection of human rights:* Illiberalism, human rights violations and repression correlate with state fragility. This also suggests that there is a close relationship between autocracy, autocratisation and fragility. Accordingly, measures to address fragility, democracy support and efforts to protect human rights must be better connected. This also implies doing “no harm to democracy” (Leininger, 2023, p. 2).
- *Identify conditions under which state-building can (or cannot) be pursued:* It would be fruitful if international security and development policymakers engaged in thorough discussions about the conditions under which state-building can be pursued. Where existing state institutions are legitimate, they should be supported. However, donor coherence and the capacity (and political will) of donors to commit resources to fragile states and to engage long-term are also important preconditions. State-building is both a costly and a long-term endeavour.
- *Learning across world regions:* Patterns of state fragility can be highly similar, despite geographical distance. In particular, rising illiberalism and increasing attacks on civil liberties are global phenomena. Hence, policy decision-makers and civil society organisations (CSOs) seeking to counter fragility should engage in mutual learning across the North/South divide.

## State fragility and international cooperation

State fragility has remained a pressing challenge for international security and development cooperation for more than two decades. Following the terrorist bombings of 9/11, state fragility was high on the agenda of security policymakers, owing to the perception that the fragility of states in the Global South could become a direct security threat for the United States and other states in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Accordingly, the topic of state fragility – and its presumed relation to terrorism, irregular migration and organised crime – found its way into crucial security documents, such as the US National Security Strategy (2002), the European Security Strategy (2003) and, recently, the German National Security Strategy (2023). Addressing state fragility soon became a central topic for international development cooperation as well, not least because NATO's military intervention in Afghanistan (2001) – and, later on, the US-led military intervention in Iraq (2003) – had to be flanked with measures to relieve human suffering and build strong institutions.

Fragility has remained highly relevant for international security and development cooperation – and, above all, the livelihoods of many people around the globe – ever since. The World Bank (2024), for instance, defines “[a]ddressing fragility, conflict, and violence [as] a strategic priority” to achieve poverty reduction and has made the topic a crucial theme in its current reform process. However, attention is increasingly shifting away from the state to an enhanced focus on society and structural *vulnerabilities*, such as countries' exposure to climate shocks. The OECD's States of Fragility platform, for instance, stresses the “multidimensional” nature of fragility, while defining fragility as “the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022; see also, Martin-Shields & Koester, in press).

However, although an enhanced emphasis on society is fruitful, the shift from “fragile states” to “fragile contexts” also comes with significant risks. For instance, it can lead international donors to excessively reach out to actors that lack the capacity to implement collectively binding decisions, such as non-governmental organisations. More importantly, it can prompt policymakers to neglect the political root causes of certain “vulnerabilities” and to lose sight of political responsibilities. State fragility is, at the same time, an important reason and the most serious hurdle for international security and development cooperation. It is a major obstacle for sustainable development, peace and security, thereby making it a key reason for engagement. However, it is usually the partner governments – and the fragile state institutions over which they preside – with whom international development and security policymakers must negotiate and implement their programmes. This comes with significant challenges. Accordingly, maintaining a focus on the state and its interrelations with society remains important.

Both academic research and policy evaluations show that international engagement to address state fragility has often failed, owing to a lack of understanding about what constitutes state fragility. For instance, research on terrorism has long stressed that jihadist groups might not only be attracted to operate in “failed” or “collapsed” states, but also, and perhaps even more frequently, in semi-functional states, such as Pakistan (Schneckener, 2004a, p. 8), or even in largely stable states, such as those in Europe, owing to the amenities and infrastructure that these states provide. The “Interministerial Strategic Evaluation of Germany's Civil Engagement in Afghanistan” indicates that international security and development decision-makers and practitioners often lacked an understanding about the political power relations in which Afghan state institutions were embedded, hampering external state-building efforts (DEval, DHPol, & GFA, 2023).

Compounding this problem, established quantitative models to measure fragility usually draw on

various indicators but subsequently aggregate all of these into one-dimensional scales. The Fragile States Index (FSI) of the Fund for Peace, for instance, locates countries on a “Heat Map”, ranging from “sustainable” to “stable” to “warning” and “alert” (FSI, 2023). Although such one-dimensional rankings might help development agencies to make and justify decisions about the allocation of funds, they tell security and development decision-makers very little about what specific governance problems they are going to encounter – and which approaches they should hence devise – in individual partner countries. For instance, both Libya and North Korea, as of 2020, were in a state of “alert” on the FSI, with almost identical scores (Libya: 95.2; North Korea: 90.2 out of 120). However, whereas Libya was/is in the midst of a civil war, North Korea was/is under the firm control of an autocratic one-party regime. Moreover, models that rank countries on continua running from “sustainable” to “alert” or from “stable” to “highly fragile”, “failed” or “collapsed” are increasingly rejected in the Global South, and thus bear the risk of damaging international development and security partnerships. This is especially so when such measurements disregard patterns (or risks) of fragility that exist in the Global North.

Against this backdrop, IDOS researchers developed the “Constellations of State Fragility” (CSF) as a differentiated, policy-relevant and more universal model to measure fragility (IDOS, 2023). Although the CSF model maintains a focus on the state, it considers state fragility primarily as a function of state–society relations.

### **Constellations of state fragility: the IDOS model**

The CSF model developed at IDOS conceptualises state fragility as a three-dimensional, continuous phenomenon that affects *all* states to a larger or lesser degree (Grävingholt, Ziaja, & Kreibaum, 2015, pp. 1284-1288). The three dimensions of state fragility on which it is built reflect three core functions that more fragile states are lacking but less fragile ones perform better: authority, as the

ability to control physical violence; capacity, as the ability to deliver basic services; and legitimacy, as the degree to which the state enjoys the consent of the population (Ziaja, Grävingholt, & Kreibaum, 2019, pp. 303-304).

To measure these three dimensions, the model employs both observable and expert-coded indicators (see Ziaja, Grävingholt, & Kreibaum, 2019 for details and sources). In gauging these indicators, the model employs a “weakest-link” approach, which means that the worst-performing indicator determines the score for each dimension. This helps balance imperfections across the empirical indicators to capture the best possible representations of states’ performances in their three core functions. Authority is measured through battle-related deaths, homicides and the monopoly of violence; capacity through an assessment of the state’s basic administration, child mortality, primary school enrolment and access to water (all as proxies for the state’s ability to deliver services and implement national policies); and legitimacy through the number of asylums granted in foreign countries (taken as a proxy for state repression), censorship and human rights. Note that elections are not included, as the model strives to separate state from regime type. From these indicators, the model generates index scores that range from 0 to 1, representing the worst and best performances, for each of the three fragility dimensions. Our data covers the years 2005 to 2020 and 172 countries per year.

In contrast to most other fragility indices, the model does not collapse these three dimensions into one aggregate, one-dimensional index (e.g. a “stable” to “highly fragile” continuum). The reason for this is that it deliberately strives to refrain from putting countries with different problems – differing performances in the same dimension – into the same “box”, just because they perform the same *on average* across different dimensions. Accordingly, instead of averaging scores across the three dimensions, the model applies a clustering algorithm that searches for *typical combinations of the three fragility dimensions* that commonly occur in

the sample of country years covered by the study (Ziaja, Grävingholt, & Kreibbaum, 2019, pp. 310-313).

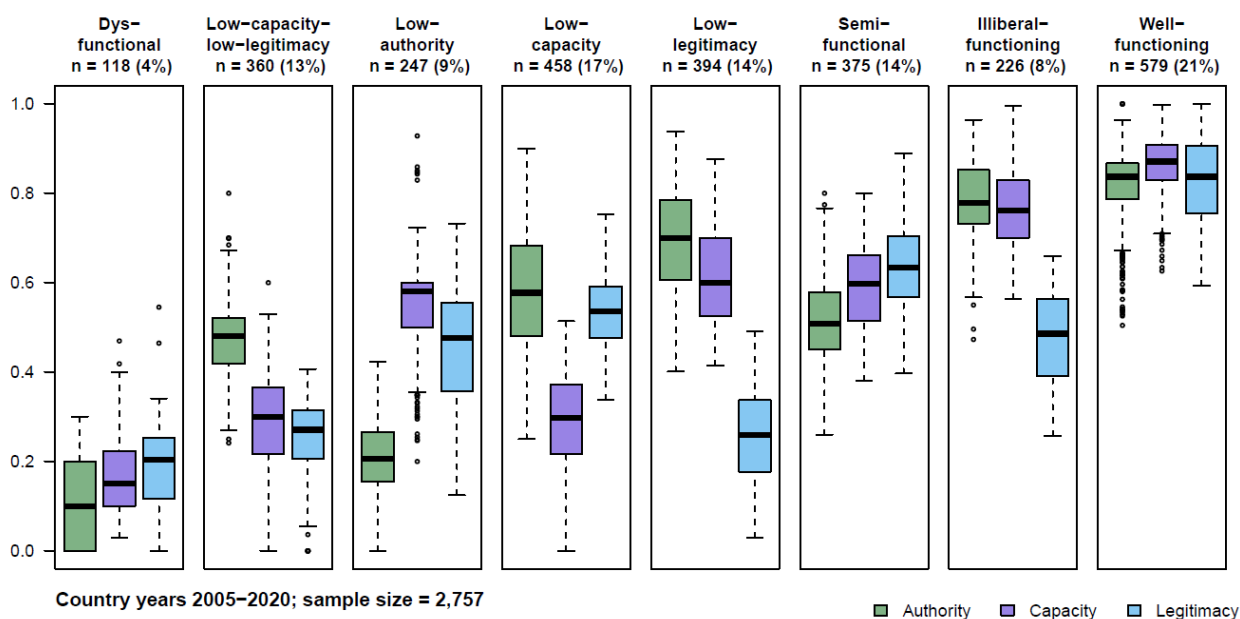
Hence, the model maintains information about the specific dimensions in which states are lacking, rejecting the assumption that better performance in one dimension can compensate for lower performance in another one. It identifies ways in which the three dimensions of fragility (authority, capacity and legitimacy) jointly occur in the real world, thereby carving out *empirical patterns* of fragility rather than building on theoretical constructs. This results in eight typical *constellations*, differentiated from each other by the average scores that the countries in these constellations achieve in the three dimensions (see Figure 1):

- “Dysfunctional states” perform badly on all dimensions, such as Libya (all country examples mentioned refer to 2020 unless otherwise noted).
- “Low-capacity-and-legitimacy states” (“low-cap-leg”) perform badly on capacity and legitimacy, but better on authority, such as Cameroon.
- “Low-authority states” perform badly on authority but achieve medium scores on capacity and legitimacy, such as Mexico.

- “Low-capacity states” perform badly on capacity but achieve medium scores on authority and legitimacy, such as Liberia.
- “Low-legitimacy states” perform badly on legitimacy but achieve medium scores on authority and capacity, such as Russia.
- “Semi-functional states” achieve medium scores on all dimensions, such as Mongolia.
- “Illiberal-functioning states” perform well on authority and capacity, but legitimacy scores are only average, such as for Hungary.
- “Well-functioning states” achieve high scores on all dimensions, such as Australia.

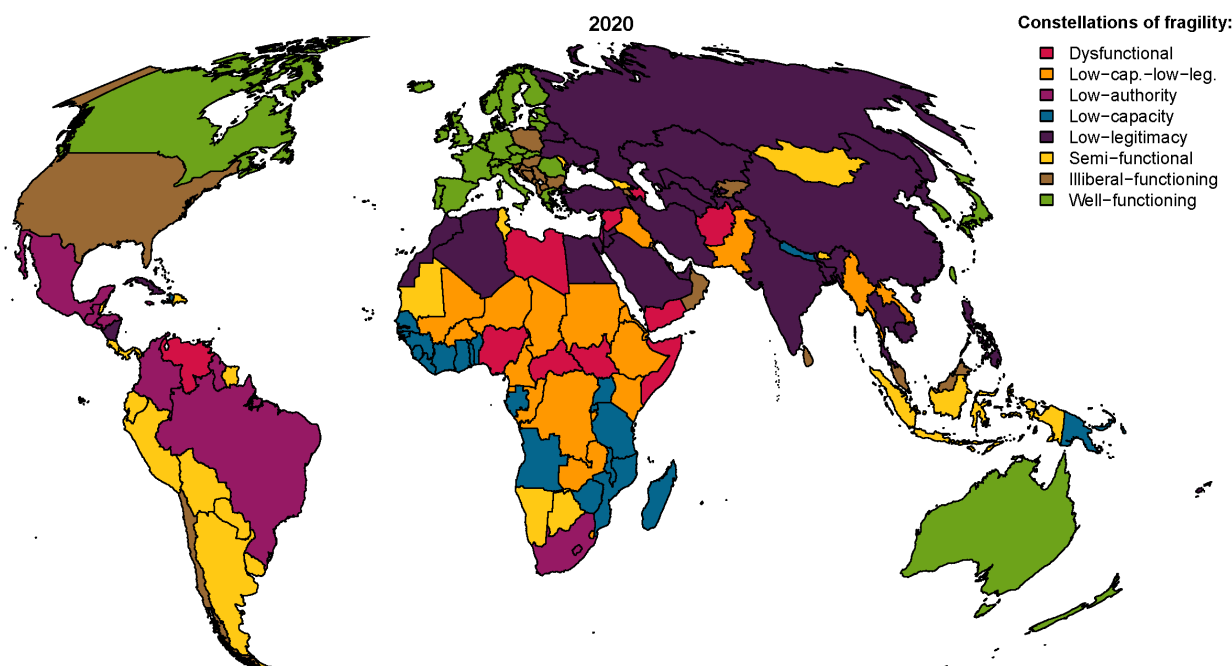
An interactive map of the CSF data is presented on an IDOS site (IDOS, 2023). It allows users both to compare countries and to track changes within countries over time. In 2022, the data was updated to cover the period from 2005 until 2020 (previously 2015). By adding the new data, two new empirical constellations emerged: The “low-capacity-and-legitimacy” and the “illiberal-functioning” states (see Ziaja & Grävingholt, 2023). Due to these new constellations, the categorisation of some countries also changed for previous years.

**Figure 1: Distribution of dimension scores within fragility constellations**



Source: Authors



**Figure 2: IDOS Constellations of State Fragility – world map**

Source: Authors

The webpage also provides brief explanations of the three fragility dimensions and the statistical probability with which individual countries fall into one of the eight constellations.

The CSF allow for a differentiated view of state fragility, in that they group countries according to their most pressing problems. Take the above-cited comparison of Libya and North Korea. Rather than categorising both countries as being “on alert” (or “highly/extremely fragile”), because they might achieve similar aggregated scores across different indicators, the model developed by IDOS places them in different fragility constellations. Civil-war-torn Libya, where no single party or administrative entity is able to exercise national territorial control, is characterised as “dysfunctional”. In contrast, North Korea, which is tightly controlled by an autocratic one-party regime, is characterised as “low-legitimacy”. Accordingly, the CSF also allow for more informed comparisons, enabling researchers and policy-makers to identify *comparable patterns of state fragility* across different world regions. In addition to North Korea, for instance, the “low-legitimacy” category comprises states such as Russia and Algeria, both of them autocratically ruled as well.

Libya, for its part, shares the category of “dysfunctional” with Afghanistan and Yemen (amongst others), both of which are likewise marked by civil war.

### Trends in state fragility: the role of illiberalism, repression and human rights violations

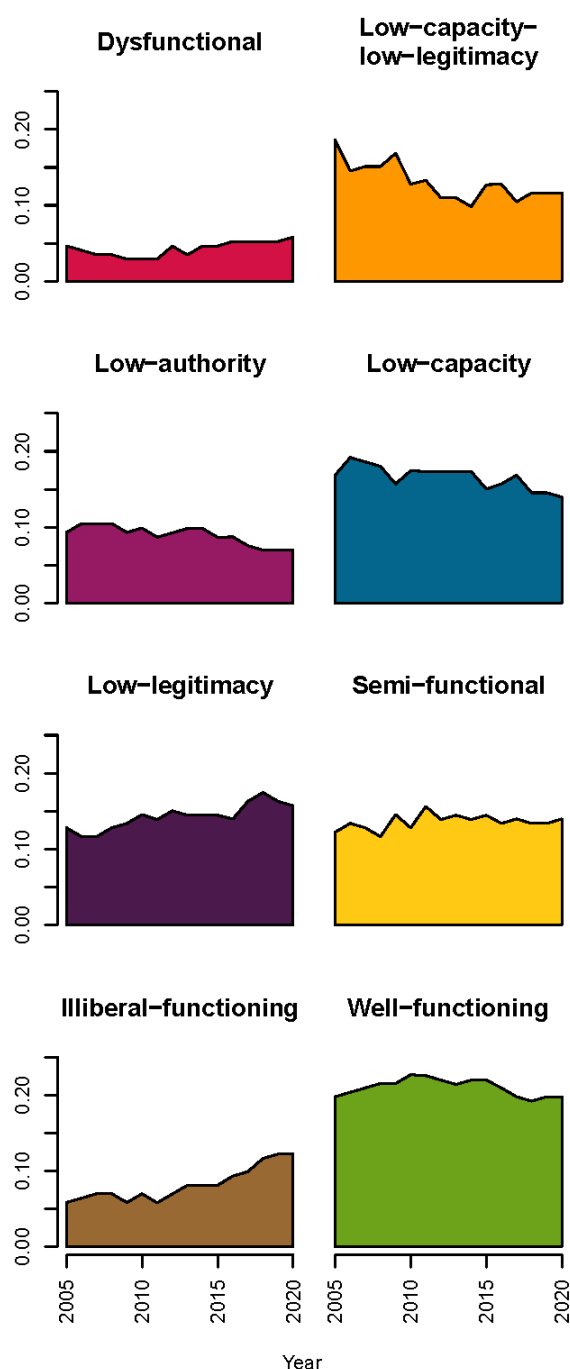
The panel titles in Figure 1 show how many country years each constellation contains over our period of investigation (2005-2020). “Dysfunctional states” make up around 4 per cent of all countries and constitute the smallest group. The biggest group is comprised of the “well-functioning states”, with 21 per cent. Most constellations grow or shrink somewhat over time (see Figure 3). The most notable increase occurs among the illiberal-functioning states: This constellation grows from 10 states (5.8 per cent) in 2005 to 21 (12.2 per cent) in 2020. This rise is in part due to “low-legitimacy states” increasing their legitimacy scores to average levels, such as Albania between 2018 and 2020. The largest gain, however, comes from formerly “well-functioning states”: Five states classified as “well-functioning” in 2005 saw such

pronounced declines in their legitimacy scores that they had, by 2020, joined the “illiberal-functioning states”: Chile, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

The United States shifted to “illiberal-functioning” in 2018, during the tenure of Donald Trump (albeit only with a probability of 49 per cent). Note that our observation period (2005-2020) does not cover changes under Joe Biden. It is important to mention, however, that for our entire investigation period the United States was notoriously difficult to categorise, not least due to the high number of homicides. Rarely did the probability score for the country’s most likely constellation reach even 60 per cent – whereas 77 per cent of the country years in the sample could be categorised with more than 75 per cent certainty. Nevertheless, the CSF’s sensitivity to potentials of fragility in the Global North makes the model more universal than other approaches.

Looking at regional trends, the categorisation of Arab Spring states shows the relevance of illiberalism, repression and human rights violations not only as components of fragility, but also as drivers of further fragility. Before the Arab Spring (2010), both Syria and Libya were in the “low-legitimacy” constellation. After the suppression of demonstrations against their autocratic regimes, both countries descended into civil war, joining the category of “dysfunctional states” (Libya: 2011 and again from 2014 onwards; Syria: 2012). These cases show that states long considered as stable were inherently fragile, owing to significant deficits in the legitimacy dimension. The CSF make this pattern visible.

**Figure 3: Proportions of fragility constellations over time**



Source: Authors

## Three main insights

Building on the above, the CSF furnish three wider, interrelated insights about what constitutes and promotes state fragility and how it can be addressed.

### I) State fragility, repression and rights violations are interrelated

The Arab Spring shows that a lack of legitimacy can destabilise states that, at first glance, might look like bastions of autocratic stability. States that fail to respond to the needs and aspirations of their people can engender resistance over the long term. Incumbents may either give in to such pressure, respond to people's demands and grant their citizens more rights, or opt for repression. In the latter case, repression can be effective in stifling protest. However, it can also lead to more resistance (e.g. Bischof & Fink, 2025; Sombatpoonsiri, 2021). In extreme cases, this can prompt a vicious cycle of repression, violent resistance and, ultimately, civil war. More generally, this also indicates that fragility, autocracy and autocratisation tend to be interrelated.

### II) Fragility is not unique to the Global South

Relatedly, state fragility is not a feature that is unique to the Global South, but one that also characterises states in the Global North, albeit normally to lesser degrees – a principle captured by the definition that the CSF are based upon (see above; Grävingholt, Ziaja, & Kreibbaum, 2015, pp. 1284-1288). In particular, it is now widely accepted that even democracies long seen as strong and consolidated are not immune to pernicious illiberalism, polarisation and onslaughts by non-democratic incumbents. Accordingly, risks of democratic backsliding are acute in European states such as Hungary, and in the United States as well (e.g., Riedl, Friesen, McCoy, & Roberts, 2023, pp. 2-3), the latter especially in the case of a re-election of Donald Trump. Viewing these states as being at direct risk of becoming dysfunctional would be misleading. However, the

CSF imply that rising illiberalism feeds into a legitimacy deficit, which constitutes a fragility dimension in itself and may promote further fragility in the long term.

### III) Differentiated models offer better guiding principles for addressing state fragility

Patterns of state fragility are highly complex, a fact that one-dimensional models and scales fail to capture. Relatedly, differentiated assessments of the relative strengths and deficits of states in the dimensions of authority, capacity and legitimacy – and of how these dimensions interact – can help security and development policy decision-makers to create more adequate toolboxes to address state fragility. Where central state institutions are democratically legitimate but fragile – owing to violent conflict, a lack of resources or a country's vulnerability to climate shocks, such as in Timor-Leste after its independence – improving the resource base and capacity of the bureaucracy and the security apparatus might be best suited for addressing fragility. However, the picture is different for “low-legitimacy states”, as the Arab Spring shows. In such states, measures to strengthen the security apparatus and the bureaucracy may stabilise autocratic regimes, increasing fragility in the long run. Conversely, democracy support – or efforts to promote liberalisation – might constitute a long-term investment in reducing fragility in such contexts.

## Conclusion and policy implications

The CSF developed at IDOS allow for a differentiated view of state fragility. Based on country-year data from 2005 to 2020, this model identifies eight typical constellations of state fragility in three core dimensions – authority, capacity and legitimacy – that can be found in real-world settings: “dysfunctional”, “low-capacity-and-legitimacy”, “low-authority”, “low-capacity”, “low-legitimacy”, “semi-functional”, “illiberal-functioning” and “well-functioning” states. Other than aggregated



models, which rank states on one-dimensional scales ranging from “stable” to “fragile” to “highly/extremely” fragile, thereby putting states with very different problems into the same “boxes”, these constellations can serve as useful starting points when it comes to developing toolboxes for international security and development cooperation in and with fragile states. Moreover, owing to its sensitivity to patterns of fragility in the Global North, the CSF model rejects the dichotomy of the developing-vs-developed-world and may hence be more acceptable to partner countries in the Global South.

Nevertheless, the model also has an important limitation. Owing to its global orientation and quantitative nature, it does not capture the specific local power constellations in which fragile state institutions are embedded at the national level. For instance, the interministerial evaluation of Germany’s civil engagement in Afghanistan highlights that representatives of the international community often misread the interests of the political elites in Afghanistan (DEval, DHPol, & GFA, 2023), a country in which warlords had captured parts of the state. Such specific conditions – and hurdles for state-building – can be identified only through excessive country expertise.

Against this backdrop, we derive four main recommendations for international security and development cooperation in fragile states.

**Improve analytical capacity by adopting a differentiated view of state fragility:** To improve their engagement in fragile states, international security and development policymakers and practitioners may adopt more fine-grained, differentiated assessments of state fragility. Specifically, such assessments should account for the fact that states can perform differently on different dimensions, and that different dimensions of fragility (authority, capacity and legitimacy) can interact and reinforce each other in multiple ways (see also, Schneckener, 2004b). In addition, country-specific assessments about the specific local power constellations in which fragile state institutions are embedded are needed to devise

adequate, context-sensitive measures for individual states.

**Connect measures to address state fragility with democracy protection and the protection of human rights:** Rising illiberalism, repression and human rights violations can act as drivers of fragility, a tendency illustrated by the Arab Spring. For this reason, measures to address state fragility and measures to protect democracy and human rights should be coordinated and connected. Accordingly, security and development cooperation must also abide by the principle to “do no harm to democracy” (Leininger, 2023, p. 2). International engagement that strengthens repressive regimes not only contradicts normative principles; it can also promote popular resistance, including violent uprisings, thereby enhancing fragility, at least in the long term. Actively using democracy support as a means to remedy fragility is more complicated, as this can elicit backlashes from autocratic rulers, who may ban international development agencies from their territories and brand CSOs that receive donor support as foreign agents (e.g. Carothers, 2006). However, where local agents themselves vie for democratic change, this option should not be discarded.

**Identify conditions under which state-building can (or cannot) be pursued:** The failure of external state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the serious unintended negative consequences that international engagement had in these contexts, show that international security and development policymakers should engage in thorough discussions about the conditions under which state-building can (or cannot) be pursued. Regarding the context of engagement, the CSF suggest that the legitimacy of existing state institutions is key for whether or not international state-building efforts can be successful. Looking at international security and development cooperation itself, donor coherence, the availability of resources, and the ability and political will to commit these resources on a long-term basis are decisive.

**Learning across world regions:** Patterns of state fragility can be highly differentiated within world regions. Conversely, states in different parts of the world can belong to the same fragility constellation, despite geographical distance. In particular, rising illiberalism, polarisation and repression are global phenomena, while examples of social cohesion and democratic resilience also exist worldwide. Hence, policy decision-makers and CSOs seeking to counter fragility should engage in mutual learning across the North/South and other geographical divides.

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