

# State fragility as a development policy challenge

Fragile states are lagging far behind in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Yet what exactly does the term itself mean? And why is state-building so difficult to accomplish?

In this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century development policy faces a new set of challenges. It had set itself – in the form of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – a series of ambitious objectives for improving the living conditions of broad swathes of the global population, one of them being to halve the number of people living in absolute poverty throughout the world by the year 2015. With three years to go before this benchmark date is reached, however, the record is sobering: many of the goals will not be achieved. One key factor in this is that a significant number of countries are held back by state fragility, some even displaying the signs of state failure. These fragile states demonstrate significant failures in performance regarding key functions of government. For example, they have a limited capability – if any at all – to establish a monopoly on the

legitimate use of force or protect their citizens from violence. Political power is subject to few or flawed controls, and a judicial system barely exists. Public services and the tax system hardly function even in the larger towns and cities. The provision of basic social welfare is

guaranteed only at the most rudimentary level. How can the phenomenon of state fragility be delineated empirically? Can external actors support the development of statehood by means of state-building? These are the questions addressed in the following.

### ■ State fragility and obstacles to development – a review of the situation

A paper commissioned by the British **Department for International Development (DFID)** in 2005 constitutes an initial attempt to get to grips with this group of fragile states from an empirical perspective. It drew on data from the World Bank, whose Country Policy

*The Afghan state is still not in a position to perform major sovereign tasks such as imposing rule of law or collecting significant tax revenues.*

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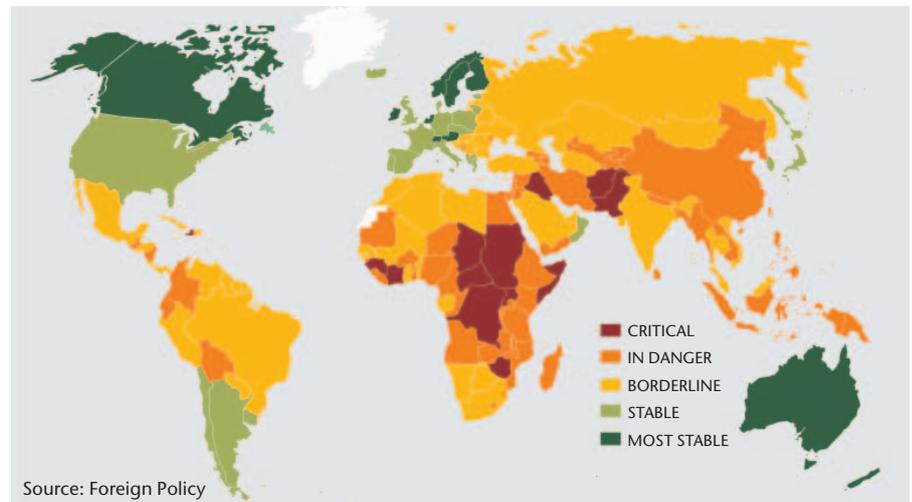
Photo: J. Hippler

and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) evaluates debtor countries' political systems and institutional capacity. On this basis the DFID compiled a list of 46 states. The social situation in this group of countries was dramatic compared with other poor countries: per capita income was roughly half that of the reference group. Infant mortality was twice as high and maternal mortality as much as three times as high. About one third of the population was undernourished, and malaria was widespread. Even back then, the message was that these fragile states – comprising some 870 million people or 14 percent of the world's population – were unlikely to achieve the MDGs.

A review undertaken by the World Bank in 2007 in its **Global Monitoring Report** came to similarly dramatic conclusions. According to its authors, 9 percent of the population of developing countries live in fragile states. At the same time, 16 percent of the world's underweight children live in these states. Even more worrying is the fact that 30 percent of children who did not complete primary school or are not expected to reach the age of five came from this group of countries as well (Bourguignon et al. 2008: 7, Fn. 6). What this makes plain is that structural issues of socio-economic development are not, in and of themselves, the reason why it is so difficult to achieve the MDGs; rather, the functional capacity of state structures is at least as crucial an issue. The dismantling of statehood motivated by neoliberal agendas that took place during the 1980s has combined with an erosion of governmental institutions due to violent conflict during the 1990s to leave behind a problematic legacy for these crisis-prone regions. Overcoming this legacy will need to have a higher priority in any future strategies for achieving the MDGs.

In addition to the overviews of fragile states based on World Bank data, the **Failed States Index** (developed jointly by the Fund for Peace, an independ-

### Failed States Index 2011



ent research institution, and *Foreign Policy* magazine; see figure above) has gained in prominence more recently. The index makes use of twelve social, economic and political indicators, for each of which a computer-aided analysis and coding process is conducted on tens of thousands of international and local media sources.

The rankings of the Failed States Index show that state fragility is to be found in nearly every region of the world. The list of least secure states includes not only the most prominent ones such as Somalia, Chad, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Haiti but also regional powers such as Nigeria (14), highly repressive dictatorships such as North Korea (21) and violence-prone democracies such as Sri Lanka (28). Despite this global distribution, it is striking how prominently the region south of the Sahara in Africa is represented on the list: seven of the ten most fragile states are located on the African continent. Many of them are in the midst of – or have recently emerged from – civil wars involving large numbers of victims. Even in places other than sub-Saharan Africa, violent conflict within states is directly related to state fragility. Thus the Peace and Conflict project at the University of Maryland concludes: “Seventy-seven percent of all international crises in

the post-Cold War era (1990–2005) include one of more actors classified as unstable, fragile, or failed at the time of the crisis” (Hewitt et al. 2008: 17).

### ■ Why is there so much talk nowadays of state fragility?

State failure is nothing new as such. In fact it can be described as a common phenomenon of the post-colonial era. After the end of the Cold War, however, many “quasi-states” (Robert Jackson) turned into “failing” or even “failed” or “collapsed” states. What was new after the end of the bi-polar world order was that the threat of state collapse in the sense of an inexorable downward spiral became more widespread and received heightened attention. However, analysing state fragility requires first of all that we define the concept of state itself. The definition provided by Pauline Baker and John A. Ausink (1996: 4) offers a helpful starting point:

**“We define state as a political entity that has legal jurisdiction and physical control over a defined territory, the authority to make collective decisions for a permanent population, a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and a government that interacts or has the capacity to interact in formal relations with other such entities.”**

First of all, then, state fragility has an internal dimension: there is a threat to social cohesion and society is no longer able to articulate or aggregate its support for or demands of the state. Often, traditional authority figures will take control in a certain locality, but they are not in a position to exercise political leadership at the national level. The external dimension must also be taken into account, particularly at sub-regional level, as neighbouring states are exposed to the threat of refugee flows, the spillover of military operations and mutual destabilisation. In addition, new economic and security structures emerge as a result of the ready availability of weapons, the spread of networks based on the war economy, and new opportunities for recruiting mercenaries, all of which threaten the security of the entire region.

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### ■ Internal state formation and external state-building

Why do internal processes of state formation succeed or fail? We refer here first and foremost to Charles Tilly's study of the formation of European states, memorably summarised by him in terms of "war-making and state-making as organised crime". In this view, states emerged above all via the

acquisition of political control, which entailed having free access to human and economic resources on the one hand while at the same time providing minimal protections on the other. What is remarkable, however, is that after the wave of de-colonisations of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, war contributed more often to state failure than to state formation in the regions of the global South. Herfried Münkler speaks of modern "wars of state collapse" (*Staatsverfallskriege*), which bear no relation to the "wars of state formation" (*staatsbildende Kriege*) in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

There are frequent calls nowadays for international actors to accelerate processes of state formation from the outside. This strategy of "state-building" is not a new idea: it was first discussed in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, modernisation theory strongly argued that post-colonial states in Asia and Africa would develop in a similar way to their European role models. In the majority of cases such expectations remained unfulfilled.

The first contributions aimed at re-launching the concept in the late 1990s were predominantly technocratic in nature. They bore certain parallels with the development policy concept of capacity building and formulated a

clearly demarcated agenda based on establishing public security and enacting institutional reforms in the state apparatus. Accordingly, they promised rapid results. However, they underestimated the influence of culture, informal institutions, and the identities and interests of local actors. Seemingly non-political reform proposals actually turned out to be highly political, and this led to unexpected difficulties in their implementation.

A second approach combined state-building with the "good governance" paradigm. The aims were far broader than those of more technocratic approaches and included the defence of human rights, the rule of law, civil society participation, gender mainstreaming, social equity, poverty reduction, macro-economic stability and growth as well as the prevention of violent conflict. However, this strategy is vulnerable to the criticism that it burdens external and internal actors with too many tasks without setting clear priorities to guide action.

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### ■ State-building in practice: failures abound, exceptions are few

Are there good prospects for external state-building? Empirical studies that focus on peace-building in post-war societies give cause for scepticism. For example, in a comparison of 121 cases between 1945 and 1999, Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis found that it was possible to prevent a renewed outbreak of civil war in barely half the cases and that more far-reaching aims regarding political liberali-



Photo: U. Terlinden

Somalia heads the Failed State Index.

*Ruined houses in Basra, Iraq.*

sation were achieved only very rarely. The reason for this poor rate of success on the part of external interventions stems not least from objectives that are often far too ambitious. What gets overlooked is that political order is always rooted in socio-cultural ideas about authority, law and legitimacy. Thus merely exporting organisational structures and constitutions is pointless unless they can be brought into line with societal values and preferences.

Even in cases where western countries have poured in enormous amounts of resources, success stories are hard to find. Afghanistan is a particularly obvious example of failure in this regard: ten years after the Petersberg conference the Afghan state is still not in a position to control large parts of its territory, to impose the rule of law or to collect significant tax revenues. External actors who arrived on the scene – usually with no prior knowledge of the situation on the ground – have been and are instrumentalised by local power holders. While it is certainly true that Afghanistan constitutes an extreme case, less dramatic cases such as East Timor and Cambodia also give little cause for optimism.

Where circumstances have been favourable, however, it has been possible to achieve moderate success. In countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone conflicts had been brought to an end by the factual defeat of one party so that the question of political power was provisionally settled. The international community sent peace missions and mobilised large sums for these relatively small countries. This made it possible not only to put an end to the violence but to achieve an economic upturn and a perceptible improvement in state capacity. Nonetheless, these countries also have a long way to go – but at least a hopeful start has been made for now.

*Photo: J. Hippler*

### ■ How to proceed?

Overall it has to be acknowledged that objectives which extend beyond an end to violence and a certain degree of economic recovery are rarely achieved. Large-scale transformative projects have tended to succeed in small countries ruled by cooperative elites interested in peace and political reform. These factors had a far greater influence on the chances of success than the strategies and resources of external actors.

Thus instead of continuing to consider large-scale interventions, research and practice should focus more attention on social and political orders on the ground. These orders often assume a “hybrid” form – in other words, they are a combination of formal state practices and institutions and informal ones. Even if these arrangements are unstable in some respects, they are nonetheless an important precondition for a society’s ability to adapt and survive.

In the future, the international community will continue to attempt to

build states in war-torn countries. This will occur in local political arenas where external forces become a part of hybrid orders. Since local actors are more familiar with these arenas, they will be able to instrumentalise international actors as a point of access to resources, power and legitimation and will ultimately play the deciding role in struggles over the country’s political future. Given this set of circumstances, there is no single best way to achieve state-building. Nevertheless, it is our view that “bottom-up state-building” constitutes an attractive – and indeed necessary – alternative. The formation and preservation of a social order is based on identities, shared norms, and legitimacy. Development policies should attempt to engage in serious dialogue and discussion with the local structures instead of continuing to refine strategies that are directed towards central state governments (Fischer/Schmelzle 2009).

A full list of references is available at:  
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