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On: 24 March 2015, At: 14:26

Publisher: Routledge

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Development in Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdip20>

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Published online: 18 Nov 2007.

To cite this article: Eghosa E. Osaghae (2007) Fragile states, *Development in Practice*, 17:4-5, 691-699, DOI: [10.1080/09614520701470060](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701470060)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520701470060>

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Fragile states

Eghosa E. Osaghae

Since the 1990s, states that lack the capacity to discharge their normal functions and drive forward development have been referred to as 'fragile states'. This article focuses on Africa, which not only has the largest concentration of prototypical fragile states, but has been the focus of attention for scholars, international development agencies, and practitioners. The author reviews competing analyses of the post-colonial African state and concludes that its characteristics of weak institutions, poverty, social inequalities, corruption, civil strife, armed conflicts, and civil war are not original conditions, but are rooted in specific historical contexts. It is essential to understand both the external and internal factors of fragility if such states are to get the assistance and empowerment that they need – not only for the benefit of their impoverished citizens, but also for the sake of global peace, prosperity, and security. Ultimately, it is the citizens of the countries concerned who are responsible for determining when states are no longer fragile – not 'benevolent' donors and the international community, whose prime motivation for interventions supposedly to strengthen the state is to ensure that fragile states find their 'rightful' places in the hegemonic global order.

KEY WORDS: Governance and Public Policy; Aid; Civil Society; Sub-Saharan Africa

The development process and state fragility

The image of the state as a powerful and overarching entity that effectively controls a geopolitical domain has influenced the key agency roles assigned to it in development discourse (Evans *et al.* 1985). This is true whether the state is conceived as a centralised organisational structure, a sovereign whose decisions are binding, an instrument of coercion and domination, or an engine of growth and development. When one thinks of the state as the mainstay of political order (with economic and social order in tow), the agency roles are justifiable. The problem is that the state has not always been able to play the roles expected of it. It is precisely for this reason that the Third World state has attracted a great deal of attention in development discourses.

This article discusses the meaning and historicity of the 'fragile state', a concept that has gained currency in development discourses since the 1990s, characterised as distressed states that generally lack the capacity to discharge the functions traditionally associated with them and to drive forward development. While the image of fragility is historically associated with the Third World in general, the focus here is mainly on Africa. The continent not only

has the largest concentration of prototypical fragile states but has also received the greatest attention of scholars, international development agencies, and practitioners. This is partly because, as Laasko and Olukoshi (1997:8) put it, 'it is perhaps in Africa, more than in other parts of the world, that the crisis of the nation-state project has been most obvious and overwhelming' (see also Davidson 1992; Zartman 1995).

The concept of fragile states

The search for how to characterise and possibly remedy problematic and troublesome states has provided the context for the evolution of the concept of fragile states, which has been popularised by the World Bank and the international development community since the early 1990s.¹ The dominance of World Bank and donor perspectives of state fragility have not always tallied with local perspectives, making it necessary to adopt a more discerning and critical (some would add balanced) approach to the interrogation of fragile states. In general, the concept of fragile states may be regarded as an all-encompassing summation of the pathologies of problematic states that have over the years been variously described as *weak, soft, over-developed, illegitimate, poor, irrelevant, de-rooted, rogue, collapsed, and failed*, each description attempting to capture one or a few problematic elements. As with other development concepts, fragility and its associated descriptive terms are relative. In this case, they suggest deviance and aberration from the dominant and supposedly universal (but Western) paradigm of the state, which played a key role in the development of capitalism.

The relativity of state fragility makes it an empirical rather than normative construct (Jackson and Rosberg 1982). Conventional wisdom defines the state in terms of four core attributes: defined territory, population, government, and recognition by other states. The first three constitute the empirical referents, and the fourth constitutes the juridical. A state is expected to be effective on all counts: establish strong and effective institutions; control and defend its territory; have a stable, loyal, and cohesive population; exercise sovereign and legitimate power within its territory and possess the resources to ensure the well-being of its citizens; and, finally, enjoy the recognition and respect of other states as a credible member of the global community. The changing realities and paradigm shifts of the post-Cold War period have seen further elaboration and extension of these attributes to include good-governance variables (strong and effective political institutions and civil society, democracy, rule of law, accountability, transparency, conflict management) and the material correlates of just and equitable resource management, poverty alleviation, and economic growth and development.

A fragile state, in contrast, may be defined as a distressed state that lacks the elements necessary to function effectively. Specifically, fragile states are characterised by one or more of the following:

- Weak, ineffective, and unstable political institutions and bad governance, conducive to loss of state autonomy; informalisation; privatisation of state, personal and exclusionary rule; neo-patrimonialism; and prebendal politics.
- Inability to exercise effective jurisdiction over its territory, leading to the recent concept of 'ungoverned territories'.
- Legitimacy crisis, occasioned by problematic national cohesion, contested citizenship, violent contestation for state power, perennial challenges to the validity and viability of the state, and massive loss and exit of citizens through internal displacement, refugee flows, separatist agitation, civil war and the like.
- Unstable and divided population, suffering from a torn social fabric, minimum social control, and pervasive strife that encourage exit from rather than loyalty to the state.

- Underdeveloped institutions of conflict management and resolution, including credible judicial structures, which pave the way for recourse to conflict-ridden, violent, non-systemic and extra-constitutional ways in which to articulate grievances and seek redress.
- Pervasive corruption, poverty, and low levels of economic growth and development, leading to lack of fiscal capacity to discharge basic functions of statehood, including, most importantly, obligations to citizens such as protection from diseases like AIDS and guarantees of overall human security.²

With these characteristics, especially the stress of mal-governance and poverty as well as violent contestations of citizenship and statehood – which typically produce civil war, armed conflict, population displacement, and refugee and humanitarian problems – fragile states ‘muddle through’ at best, and constantly face the threat of collapse, break-up, or disintegration. As Jackson and Rosberg (1982) found from their study, extremely fragile states – like Somalia or Sierra Leone – collapsed at different points in time, but remained states only in name and because of their extant recognition by international law. Chabal and Daloz (1999) suggest that political disorder may be less a consequence of state fragility than a political instrument employed by the power-holding elite. So, rather than a pathology or aberration, disorder (in the form of weak institutions, informalisation of political processes, legitimacy crisis, civil strife, armed conflict) may very well be a deliberate strategy of politics in fragile states. (See also Bayart *et al.* 1999.)

The instability of fragile states and the stress that they impose on neighbouring states and the international community through refugee flows and proliferation of small arms make them a threat to global peace, security, and prosperity (Stiglitz 2003; Chua 2004). Two further factors reinforce the threat posed by fragile states. The first is that with the heightening of global economic inequalities, the number of states judged by the World Bank to be ‘fragile’ has almost doubled: from 14 to 26 between 2000 and 2006 (World Bank 2006), of which 14 are in sub-Saharan Africa. The other factor is neglect of the plight of poor states by the international community. The failure of the United Nations and other key global actors to respond promptly to civil wars in Rwanda, Liberia, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Somalia, and Sudan (Darfur) contributed in large measure to state collapse and fragility-inducing stress inflicted on neighbouring countries. Direct foreign investment and flows to distressed states, especially in Africa, have remained very low, ostensibly because of the high risk of doing business there. While these reasons can be rationalised in terms of the competitiveness of the global economy, the point remains that global peace and security calls for greater will and commitment on the part of the international development community.

The historicity of fragile states

Although the concept of fragile states gained currency in the 1990s, it represents some kind of old wine in a new bottle. The phenomenon that it describes has a history that is almost as old as the contemporary – or post-colonial – state in the Third World (Osagahae 1999a; 2005). Two periods of engagement can be distinguished. The first began at independence and spanned the period of the Cold War. In this period, state structural disabilities (weak and fragile institutions, authoritarian tendencies, weak economies, contested nationhood, armed conflicts, separatist agitations, over-dependence on foreign aid, susceptibility to external shocks) were recognised, but the circumstances of the Cold War assured such states a great deal of understanding and support, even if they left debilitating foreign debt in their wake. The second period of engagement covers the years from the end of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s to the present. Its hallmark has been a deterioration of the material conditions of most developing countries

and the capacities of their states to promote and consolidate development, leaving states more vulnerable to external shocks and interventions. This has been accompanied by the increased tendency to treat the state as an independent or autonomous system and deny the externalities of its problems (Herbst 1996/1997). The triumph of (neo)-liberalism saw the emergence of a new more hegemonic and interventionist global order, whose major pastime became whipping deviant states into line.

Gone are the indulgences of the Cold War era. Here instead is a regime that seeks to reproduce the liberal state through political, economic, and social reforms imposed as conditionalities and benchmarks by the World Bank, IMF, and the international development community, and at times through military intervention. This hegemonic character of global politics, which has elicited counter-revolutionary mobilisation on a global scale, including terrorism, also makes global peace and security a key objective of interventions. These elements have led to a rethinking of the state that is not shy of considering dissolution of 'troublesome' states. Kothari (1988) captures this new thinking in a thesis of 'dispensability', which he believes informs the new agenda for a world order in which the fruits of progress can be held secure for certain privileged regions of the world. The thesis is as follows:

Certain states, communities and regions... have become an unacceptable burden on the world economy. These segments are incapable and unwilling to mend their ways. They subsist as parasites on the rest of the world. To allow their continued existence as parasites... would gravely endanger the health and future of the world economy. They must be dispensed with, and left to fend for themselves. (Kothari 1988: 4–5)

Kothari may have stated the thesis in rather strong terms, but it does reflect the realities of engagement with fragile states in the post-Cold War era. The pressure is on states to salvage themselves, discharge their obligations to donors and benefactors, and meet set targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) under the guidance of the World Bank, IMF, and other champions of neo-liberalism or be left out of the active and competitive global system. Notions of self-inflicted marginalisation, Afro-pessimism, and 'basket cases', which African states have worked hard to dispel, tell part of the story – as do the closures of entry to affluent societies against economic migrants from poor and conflict-torn countries, which make it incumbent on the states to get their acts together. Unlike the Cold War period, scholars, development practitioners, and donors no longer seem willing to help fragile states to survive at all costs. This raises the stakes.

Let us now turn to examine the hows and whys of fragility. For this purpose we must move beyond the mere empirical characterisations and typologies that have dominated World Bank/IMF perspectives to analyse the bases of fragility. While it is true that fragile states are low-income and poorly governed, with a high prevalence of corruption, poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and disease, and prone to violent conflict and war, these attributes do not in and of themselves explain why they are fragile. In other words, state fragility is a dependent variable and not an independent or original condition. Migdal *et al.* (1994: 2) identify society and the socio-economic determinants of politics as key in this regard, because 'societies affect states as much as, or perhaps more than, states affect societies'. To these we shall add external forces that have historically shaped state and social formations in the Third World.

Exploring the bases of fragility

The deviant, non-conventional, and unique characters of state formations in the Third World have long been recognised. Major signposts include the initial 'discovery' of non-Western state systems, which necessitated the formulation of new tools and concepts of analysis.

It has been argued that, because of its epochal effects, colonialism is the most important explanatory factor for the unique trajectory of state growth in the Third World and the subsequent problems, the bottom line being that the state model was imported wholesale and imposed on erstwhile colonies (Ekeh 1975, 1983; Alavi 1979; Young 1994). The failure to properly graft or adapt the 'migrated' state structures to the circumstances of the colony and post-colony is said to have created a disjunctive duality between state and society that left the state suspended above society like a balloon (Hyden 1980).

This was the context within which fragile states evolved. The first set of problems concerned the nature of the colonial state itself. It remained aloof from indigenous or native society and enforced its will through violence and repression, placing emphasis on the rudiments of law and order that were sufficient to ensure economic exploitation and uphold the standards of European settlers (Young 1994). A second set of problems arose from the nature of relations between the state and (native) society, as well as the anomalies of the migration of state structures from Europe. As many scholars have argued, it became impossible for the 'natives' to appropriate the state, which they perceived as alien and serving the interests of the coloniser and not those of the colonised (Ake 1985; Davidson 1992; Osaghae 1989, 1999a). This gave rise to the endemic legitimacy crisis that marooned the colonial state and its post-colonial successor.

The overall relevance of the state for the citizens was always a contested issue (Ihonvbere 1994). This encouraged exit and opposition by alienated, marginalised, and excluded segments, and the development of shadow state structures, mainly communal self-help organisations which emerged to fill the void left by state failure (Osaghae 1999b). For Alavi (1979), the fact that the social formations of the colony upon which migrated state structures were imposed were at a lower level of development than in Metropolitan Europe meant that the state was 'overdeveloped'. Overdevelopment gave the state the appearance of powerfulness, but its 'omnipresence' did not translate into 'omnipotence' (Chazan 1988). Young (1994) attributes the crisis of national cohesion, one of the defining elements of state fragility, to the fact that the imported state lacked the nationhood that had defined and underpinned its growth in Europe. This was why nationalism, the avowed ideology of cohesion, overarching loyalty to the central state, and self-determination were unable to salvage the state as had been expected.

Opinions are divided on the significance of colonialism for subsequent state fragility in Africa. Ake (1985) suggests that what happened at independence was a changing of the guard, rather than a change in the character of the state which, by the nature of its peripheral formation and integration into the global system, was an appendage of the dominant centres. Ekeh (1983) questions the validity of episodic perspectives, which consider the period of colonialism too limited in Africa's long history to have the kinds of epochal effect claimed for it. Post-colonial states have, it has been argued, shown a great deal of diversity and unevenness in their abilities to cope with the challenges of development, which suggests that factors other than colonialism have to be examined in order to explain state fragility. Why, for instance, have the Asian tigers succeeded and the African states failed? Why has Botswana done well, and Nigeria and Ghana have not?

Yet others argue that the focus on colonialism distracts attention from autochthonous factors. The argument that then follows is that the pathologies of the state in the Third World, especially the African species, are partly – and in some cases largely – endemic to indigenous formations. Contrary to the suggestion that the colonial and post-colonial states were artificial, Bayart (1991: 53) argues that they 'were built upon their own social foundations'. Similarly, Chabal and Daloz (1999: 4) have pointed out that 'the state in Africa was never properly institutionalised because it was never significantly emancipated from [indigenous] society'. The import of these claims is that corruption, violent politics, bad governance, and other fragile state variables are products of the appropriation of the state by autochthonous forces. The point missed by

Bayart and others, however, is that the acts of state creation, including the determination of boundaries, were undertaken by European colonisers and were not negotiated with the colonised. It is in this sense that the states are regarded as artificial. The other point missed by Bayart and others is that the so-called indigenous social structures that survived under colonialism were actually *transformed indigenous structures*, having undergone changes of epochal magnitude during the colonial encounter. What colonialism did was to turn society upside down and inside out (Ekeh 1983). The post-colonial indigenous sector is no different: it is a product of the encounters with powerful forces of globalisation that have created 'states of disarray' (UNRISD 1995; Osaghae 2005).

Colonialism certainly laid the foundations for externalities and disarticulations that have cumulatively since independence tended to disable rather than strengthen the state (Bose 2004). The devastating effects of Cold War interventions linger on. In the post-Cold War period, states in the Third World have fared much worse. Economic and political reforms, especially structural adjustment programmes, have demonstrably weakened their economies and governments, and raised the stakes of what is now popularly known as the National Question, precipitating authoritarianism, anti-state mobilisations, armed conflicts and civil war (Gibbon *et al.* 1992; van de Walle 2001). The distorted structures and practices of the WTO, as well as the double standards and barricades erected by the USA and other leading industrialised countries, have restricted exports, encouraged dumping and smuggling, and slowed down industrial and economic growth in peripheral formations. Huge foreign debts have also limited the options available to fragile states.

None of this absolves fragile states of blame. The fact that many states in the Third World remain afloat and have in fact been effective drivers of the development process in spite of the common historical trajectories means that we must also look inwards at internal cultural, social, economic, and political factors in order to explain the phenomenon of fragile states. Clearly, problems such as poor resources and the 'mono-crop' nature of economies which depend on only one agricultural or mineral commodity, weak and fragile institutions, bad governance variables, corruption, 'politics of the belly', high unemployment, food insecurity, patrimonialism and tendencies toward personal authoritarian rule, poor management of the public domain, capital flight, brain drain, social inequalities occasioned by unequal and discriminatory citizenship, high incidence of violent crimes, and underdevelopment of structures of conflict management and resolution are internally located and, notwithstanding the externalities that may attend them, have to be resolved from within.

There is an even more important reason why there should be a closer focus on the internal dynamics of fragile states than on externalities. This is the fact that the states have been the sites of popular struggles by coalitions of citizens and civil society, which seek to redeem and salvage the state through appropriation and ownership to make it an effective manager of development. In Africa, these struggles have been analysed in terms of the first (anti-colonial) and second (anti-authoritarian state) liberation or independence movements (Ekeh 1997; Osaghae 2005). The objective of these movements 'is to transform the state in such a way that it becomes an ally rather than an obstacle in the democratisation [and development] process' (Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee 1997: 8). The implication of the local struggles 'from below' is that the definition and turnaround of fragile states is not all about what the World Bank/IMF, donors, and the international development community think or do, which is substantially the case at present. As has happened in one or two cases (Ghana and Uganda readily come to mind), the danger in such one-sidedness is the possible disconnection between the evaluation of the World Bank/IMF and donors and that of the citizens and local coalitions. Thus Ghana and Uganda were judged by the Bank to be reform success cases in the 1990s, but the citizens of both countries thought otherwise because their material conditions

did not show any remarkable improvement and, as a consequence, the anti-state struggles persisted. The need for synergy between the dominant and hegemonic global actors and local constituents in the engagement with fragile states cannot be overemphasised.

Conclusion

The concept of fragile states is appropriate for characterising problematic and troublesome states that have potential not only to self-destruct but also to endanger global peace, prosperity, and security. As an empirical construct, it is valid and is therefore likely to remain a development buzzword for some time to come. It does not have the ideological image and baggage of *rogue state*, for example, or the finality of the *failed or collapsed state*, and offers a ‘window of opportunity’ for redemption and strengthening if the right diagnosis is made and appropriate medicines are administered, which is the framework within which the World Bank/IMF and international development partners ought to be engaging fragile states. However, this conceptual logic has not been followed through for at least two reasons.

First, ‘fragile state’ remains a characterisation or typological construct, and the assumption is that the pathologies of such states are inherent to deviant statehood. But certainly, weak institutions, poverty, social inequalities, corruption, civil strife, armed conflicts, and civil war cannot be and are not original conditions. Second, the failure to historicise state fragility and to assign the full weight of externalities and externally induced disarticulations has so far prepared the ground for wrong therapies. The tendency to ignore the local/internal conceptions of state fragility and the struggles to redeem them, and the preference for curtailment or possible elimination of the threat potential of fragile states (through isolation or military intervention or outright neglect and indifference, for instance), which is the essence of the dispensability thesis advanced by Kothari and discussed earlier, misses the point about superpower complicity that can only be remedied through composite global–local action. The argument in this article is that the external and internal factors of fragility have to be fully interrogated if these countries are to get the kind of assistance and empowerment that they so clearly deserve – at least for the sake of global peace, prosperity, and security, if not for that of the impoverished citizens of fragile states. But, ultimately, the responsibility for determining when states are no longer fragile is that of the citizens of the countries concerned, and not that of ‘benevolent’ donors and the international development community, whose prime motivation for supposed state-strengthening interventions is to ensure that fragile states take their ‘rightful’ places in the hegemonic global order.

Notes

1. Some of the major publications which marked the ‘entry’ of fragile states from a substantially African perspective include the World Bank’s *World Development Reports* (from 1988), *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (1989) and *Governance and Development* (1992); Migdal (1988), Wunsch and Olowu (1990), Joseph (1990), Hyden and Bratton (1992) and Zartman (1995).
2. Among others, Myrdal (1968) analysed the *soft state*, which he defined as a state that is unable to enforce its will, especially in areas which demand moral rectitude (see also Rothchild 1987); Ekeh (1975) interrogated the evolution and interactions of the *two publics* in Africa; Alavi (1979) examined the *overdeveloped state*. Others have analysed the *weak state* (Migdal 1988), *weak leviathan* (Callaghy 1987), *neopatrimonial statehood* (Bratton and van de Walle 1994), centralisation and powerlessness (Kohli 1994), governance and politics (Hyden and Bratton 1992), prebendal politics (Joseph 1987), and *politics of the belly* (Bayart 1993).

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