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A fragile guideline
to development assistance

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The concept of fragility has gained an increasing relevance in the development discourse. Still, fragility remains a fuzzy and elusive concept. This paper presents a review of the literature, and it identifies two main sets of definitions of fragility, which substantially differ in their focus and breadth, and that reflect evolution of the discourse around this developmental concept. The limited consensus that is found in the literature suggests that the analytical salience and the direct operational value-added of this concept still remain unclear. Nevertheless the debate around state fragility played an important advocacy role, and it has offered key methodological insights with respect to the challenges that donors face, and on what it can be realistically achieved through external engagement.

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1 Fragility: a new developmental concept

The dominant academic and policy-oriented discourse on economic development has been progressively adopting concepts that had been originally introduced in different arenas or academic fields. *Fragility* is one of these concepts: it initially emerged in the national security arena, as the 9/11 terrorist attacks strengthened the perception that countries whose state institutions are unable to retain an effective control over their territory could pose a threat to global security. According to the definition of fragile states provided by the OECD *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations*, "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 populations" (OECD/DAC, 2007).

Robert Zoellick, the president of the World Bank, argued that "fragile states are the toughest development challenge of our era" (Zoellick, 2008).[1] Fragility is currently moving up fast in the list of priorities in the development community, also because of the concerns related to the adverse effects of recent global economic and financial crisis upon fragile countries. Still, any statement about its relevance can be easily matched by an equal - or even larger - number of caveats about its fuzziness and indeterminacy, which could undermine its analytical salience and operational value-added. Indeed, "despite its importance as part of the international policy discourse, the idea of state fragility remains an elusive concept" (Carment, Prest, and Samy, 2008). This is not surprising, as "there are generally no uniquely correct definitions of concepts drawn from common parlance and then used in a rather different context" (Stewart and Brown, 2009).[2]

A notable dimension of this fuzziness is represented by the fact that either country or state is interchangeably matched with the label "fragile". The World Bank, where the expression *Low Income Countries Under Stress*, LICUS, had been coined and used, proposed to adopt the term fragile state in its own documents, so "to facilitate a harmonized approach, and recognizing the increased international use of the term fragile states" (World Bank, 2005), as if the choice of the referring to either a country or a state was immaterial with respect to

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[1] The relevance of this challenge is reflected by the fact that the 2011 edition of the World Bank flagship publication, the *World Development Report*, will focus on conflicts and fragility.

[2] The lengthy process of refinement and consolidation undergone by the concept of vulnerability provides a good example of this dynamic (Guillaumont, 2009).

the substantive content of this concept.[3]

Cammack, McLeod, Rocha Menocal, and Christiansen (2006) observe that, besides the fuzziness that surrounds the definition of fragility, a large - and still growing[4] - number of terms often replace the world fragile "without a precise change in meaning". It is also a common practice to refer to the countries in the so-called *Bottom Billion* as fragile countries (see, for instance, Zoellick (2008)), though this list of countries was defined by Paul Collier on a set of criteria which are not all related to any of the existing definitions of fragility.[5]

The loosely defined character of the concept of fragility is a disturbing feature from both an academic and from a policy-oriented perspective, as it produces an unwarranted perception of coincidence among rather different approaches which use the same jargon. Different underlying definitions of fragility can lead to identify different countries as fragile, and they can induce the various proponents to argue in favour of different sets of priorities to be pursued by the donor community.

The purpose of this paper is to review briefly the genesis of the concept of fragility, and the varying nuances that have characterised this word, both in the academic literature and in policy-oriented documents, since it became a widely referred to term in the literature on development studies. Such an effort is crucial, as different understandings of what fragility is all about have relevant implications in terms of policy design.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we first discuss the genesis of the discourse around fragility in the development arena, and how this influences the initial definitions of state fragility. We then discuss the limitations of these definitions, and the ensuing attempts to overcome them. Finally, we discuss the remaining theoretical ambiguities that surround the concept of fragility, and the positive contributions that the academic and policy-oriented debate brought to donors' understanding of the challenges of their engagement in situations of fragility.

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[3]In this paper, the use of either of the two expressions does not reflect the endorsement of this choice by the authors; instead, it reflects the stances taken by the various definitions to which we refer.

[4]Zoellick (2008) added the expression "broken states" to this list of twelve terms, but "in most cases, these labels do not have a meaning that is clearly understood far beyond the author who has used them" (Cammack, McLeod, Rocha Menocal, and Christiansen, 2006).

[5]The list of 58 countries that form *the Bottom Billion* was built on the basis of four criteria which also include being landlocked with "bad neighbours" (Collier, 2007).

2   A variety of competing definitions

Notwithstanding its recent appearance in the development discourse, the definition of fragility varies substantially across different authors and institutions.[6] We identify two main groups of definitions, which differ with respect to their focus and breadth.

Specifically, the first group provides several *outcome-based* definitions of fragility, while the second group focuses more on *dynamic aspects*, trying to unpack the distinctive features of the public decision making process that differentiate state fragility from underdevelopment. The two groups of definitions can also be differentiated with respect to the time dimension, as those in the second group represented an attempt to overcome the limitations of earlier definitions, whose content was closely related to the the historical origin of the debate around state fragility.

The definitions that we include in the first group identify a set of core policy objectives that should be pursued by state institutions, and define fragility as a misalignment between these objectives and those which are actually pursued. The second group of definitions is less concerned with specific outcomes, such as poverty reduction, and it acknowledges that the policy objectives pursued by state institutions are endogenously determined by the interaction between the state and the society. These definitions focus on the traits of the interaction between state and non-state actors, and on the distribution of political power among contending elites.

Both groups of definitions take - either implicitly or explicitly - a normative stance when it comes to identify the set of policy objectives that should be pursued by the public action,[7] or to determine the ideal type of institutional arrangements against which actual state institutions are compared to.[8] Needless to say, the distinction between the proposed

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[6]The overview of definitions of fragility that we provide in this paper is not meant to be exhaustive, and it is functional to highlighting the salient features of the debate around this concept, and of its evolution over time; we refer the reader to Mcloughlin (2009) and Carment, Prest, and Samy (2010) for a comprehensive list of existing definitions.

[7]World Bank (2009b) states that the CPIA, which it is used to measure and define fragility, "assesses the quality of a country's policy and institutional framework - that is the extent to which that framework supports sustainable growth, poverty reduction, and the effective use of development assistance", so that state capacity is measured against its ability to reach this set of objectives.

[8]Böge, Brown, Clements, and Nolan (2008) and Hameiri (2010) observes that the literature on state building, which is the central objective of donors' engagement with fragile countries (OECD/DAC, 2007), is based on a Weberian, neutral conception of the state, which is regarded as a set of institutions with

two groups of definitions is not always sharp, and we highlight below the contributions which actually build a bridge between an outcome-based approach to the definition of fragility, and definitions more concerned with procedural aspects.

2.1 How fragility made its way in the development discourse

The first set of definitions originates from a debate that was conducted outside the development community, and which gained momentum after the 9/11 attacks, on one hand, and because of the growing donors' concerns for a set of countries which appeared to be left behind in the race towards the Millennium Development Goals by the prevailing aid allocation systems.

The 1990s and the early 2000s were marked both by a progressive shift away from project-based assistance towards budget support, and by an increasing recognition of the role of the policies adopted by the governments in recipient countries in mediating the impact of aid programmes (Chhotray and Hulme, 2009). The combined effect of these two major changes was an increase in aid selectivity, loosely defined as an attempt to reward the countries which were regarded as good performers with growing aid flows. The flip-side of the coin of a performance-based allocation mechanism was that some countries became aid orphans, as countries characterised by what was judged as a poor - and not development-oriented - governance recorded sharply declining and volatile aid flows (Levin and Dollar, 2005; Fielding and Mavrotas, 2008). The growing emphasis on aid selectivity, which was reflected in the so-called Monterrey Consensus, and that led to a substantial shift in bilateral aid allocation (Dollar and Levin, 2006), confronted the donors with a hard-to-solve *Samaritan's Dilemma*. The incentive mechanism which informed performance-based allocation, PBA, systems required a reduction of aid flows towards the countries where it was most needed, though possibly least effective.

Such a policy shift on the donors' side also endangered the progress towards the current core targets of the development efforts: the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs are to be achieved by the year 2015, a time-frame that is too short to allow the incentive mechanism underlying the Monterrey Consensus to bring non-performing

predefined characteristics and output; the statement by Carment, Prest, and Samy (2010) that "fragility for us is a measure of the extent to which the actual practices of states differ from their idealized images" is reflective of this normative approach to state fragility.

countries back on the track of sound, development-friendly, policies. Hence, a strict adherence to the aid selectivity principle could come at the cost of failing to achieve the targets which were set by the United Nations in September 2000. Indeed, two of the most recent editions of the *Global Monitoring Report* by the World Bank evidenced that countries with ineffective or poorly-functioning institutions were not progressing towards the achievement of the MDGs, or were even moving backwards (World Bank, 2007, 2009b). These countries have recently begun to be labeled as fragile countries, though - as recalled in the introduction - a rich variety of differently nuanced definitions can be found in the literature.

At the same time, the debate on fragile countries has come along with a renewed emphasis on the link between development and security. Countries permeable to criminal activities and terrorist networks, with latent sources of political instability, with a pervasive sense of mistrust or grievance towards state institutions, or whose state institutions fail to meet the Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence have emerged as an international priority since the mid-1990s.[9] The new interest towards these countries is motivated not only by the severe violations of human rights suffered by their people, but also by the negative security spill-overs imposed upon other countries. The centrality of security concerns in the debate on fragile countries is mirrored by distribution of aid flows: the two main conflict-settings in the scenario of world politics - Afghanistan and Iraq - absorbed 34 percent of the total real increase in aid to fragile countries, defined as such by OECD (2010), between 2000 and 2008, with two big players in highly unstable regions - Pakistan and Ethiopia - absorbing another 14 percent (OECD, 2010). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the international community became fully aware of the lack of an adequate operational and conceptual framework[10] to guide international interventions and assistance in these countries which were regarded as potential threats to global security (Chataigner and Ouarzazi,

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[9] "One can even argue that the topic of fragile states only gained major prominence when - and because - it was framed in the context of the security discourse of the major developed states" (Böge, Brown, Clements, and Nolan, 2008)

[10] Chandler (2010) argues that the debate around state fragility and the state building agenda have been a response to the inability of the international community to solve the political and ethical dilemmas related to the tension between the right of intervention and state sovereignty. In front of "the failure of Western powers to build any such consensus' on humanitarian military interventions' and on how to provide the expensive social, economic and military resources in conflict settings, the international community opted for the "state-building solution", which can be regarded as a "technical" intervention, that transfers the responsibility from the international community to the "failing" states themselves (Chandler, 2010).

2007).[11]

2.2 Outcome-based definitions of fragility

The way in which fragility made its way in the development debate helps us to understand the implicit assumptions underlying the early definitions of fragility and, why these attempted to propose a classification of fragile countries. The OECD pointed out 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 populations" (OECD/DAC, 2007), and the DFID and USAID adopted a very similar notion of fragile countries (DFID, 2005; USAID, 2005). The World Bank defined - and still defines - countries as fragile according to the total score they are assigned in its annual Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, CPIA, a multidimensional rating system that assesses the policies and the institutional setting of a country. The approach followed by the World Bank has a central role in the debate on state fragility, since most of the classifications used by donor agencies generally proxy a state's commitment and capacity to implement pro-poor policies in terms of the CPIA score assigned to a country. Interestingly, the role of this multidimensional rating system, that has been used since the mid-1970s, was to determine the eligibility of a country for concessional lending. In this sense, the growing concern in the donors community about how to deal with fragile countries appeared as "a political response to an operational issue" (Guillaumont and Guillaumont Jeanneney, 2009). Fragile countries, characterized by "a lack of political commitment and insufficient capacity to develop and implement pro-poor policies" (OECD/DAC, 2006) represent difficult partners and a challenging test for aid effectiveness and fairness. Guillaumont and Guillaumont Jeanneney (2009) observe that "when it appeared clear that countries facing particularly difficult situations could not receive much from the PBA, although they could need more, the answer was then to give them a specific treatment [...] fragile states were first identified, by one way or another, as countries where the PBA should not apply".

These early definitions evidence that the notion of fragile country is intrinsically a relational and normative one, as it refers to a misalignment between the political will or the

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[11]It is worth recalling that the connection between state fragility and transnational threats is no based a shared consensus in the literature (see Chandler (2006), Heir (2007), Newman (2007) and Patrick (2007) on this).

capacity of a country and the universal priorities set out by the donor community.

The key operational issue and research question behind the outcome-based definitions of state fragility is how to promote development and poverty reduction in fragile countries, namely where the implementation of pro-poor policies is particularly difficult. Under this perspective, the main targets for donor community are to ensure that aid allocation rules and practices do not disadvantage fragile countries and to improve aid effectiveness in these countries. Hence, the label of fragile country would mainly signal the high priority for the donor community to improve aid effectiveness towards the countries which are defined as such. This requires supporting the case for tailor-made delivery systems. In fragile countries, for instance, general budget-support, which could contribute to the strengthening of state institutions, faces the risk of a limited effectiveness - as far as major development outcomes are concerned - in the short run. The emphasis on the need to improve aid effectiveness notwithstanding, this approach to fragility also acknowledged that donors should help fragile countries to build pro-poor enabling state institutions and arrangements, as external actors should "focus on state-building as the central objective" (OECD/DAC, 2007).

2.3 The limitations of outcome-based definitions

The growing interest in the development community around fragility led to a burgeoning number of contributions, both in the academic and in the policy-oriented literature, that attempted to refine the understanding of this newly introduced concept. A deeper reflection around state fragility originated by the need to move one step further, analyzing the specific *causes* of the lack of capacity or willingness to pursue basic development objectives that differentiates fragile from other underdeveloped countries.

Indeed, the main limitation of an outcome-based definition of fragility - such as the one in OECD/DAC (2007) recalled above - is that it blurs the distinction between fragility and underdevelopment,[12] as all underdeveloped countries lack the capacity to implement effective pro-poor policies. This limitation stems from the fact that an outcome-based definition is inherently *static*, identifying fragile countries with respect to what a state is currently able - or is willing - to provide to its citizens. This entails that very diverse countries are grouped together under the label of fragility, so that Briscoe (2008) wondered "whether an effective,

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[12]Mcloughlin (2009) observes that a major shortcoming of the definition of fragility through the CPIA is that "it equates fragility with underdevelopment".

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targeted policy can be derived from an all-encompassing label", as "there is little to hold state fragility together other than its symptoms: poverty, insecurity, proneness to conflict, corruption" (Chesterman, Ignatieff, and Thakur, 2004).[13] The key analytical challenge is to understand why countries with similar poor development outcomes have followed markedly paths with respect to the consolidation of their state institutions and to the exposure to the risk of violent conflict, as argued by Putzel (2010).[14]

Another relevant limitation of the early definitions of fragility is that that they called into question the political priorities set by a country. The international community regards human rights as unalienable, indivisible, and universal. The MDGs set a collective responsibility and global commitment for human development, and the General Assembly of the United Nations established that the international community has the responsibility to intervene if "national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (UN, 2005). Moreover, donors are called to assist people during and aftermath a humanitarian crisis under the guidance of the humanitarian principles [15].

The responsibility of the international community to promote human rights and human development, however, cannot be equated with to the promotion of specific institutional and political regimes. It is recognized that national authorities and states have a primary role in ensuring the respect of human rights, in defining institutional reforms and national policies for poverty reduction and economic prosperity as well as in implementing humanitarian assistance. A closer look at the CPIA criteria, however, reveals that that fragility is evaluated according to a detailed list of benchmark policies and institutional arrangements that "are expected to lead, over time, to favorable growth and poverty reduction outcomes" (World Bank, 2009a). As a result, some of the underlying components of the overall CPIA score relate to dimensions - such as the regulation of the business environment, trade policies or

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[13]The reference to the countries in *The Bottom Billion* as fragile countries also contributes to the undue overlap between fragility and underdevelopment, as Collier (2007) includes *all* the countries located in continental Africa between the Sahel and Namibia in the list of 58 countries, with Gabon representing the unique exception.

[14]The empirical analysis by Stewart and Brown (2009) reveals that most of the countries that are defined as fragile according to their multidimensional definition (see below), fail along just one of the three proposed dimensions, so that every country is fragile in its own way.

[15]The UN Resolution 46/182 established that the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory" (UN, 1991)

the level of the public debt (World Bank, 2009a) - which are irrelevant for the existing definitions of fragility[16] In this sense, the outcome-based notion of state fragility has a stringent normative content as the capacity of the state is associated with specific institutional settings and policies.

Under this perspective, the use of the expression "fragile country" becomes politically sensitive and highly contentious. Collier (2007), for instance, did not initially disclose the list of countries that form its world-famous *Bottom Billion*,[17] as "this is not a company that countries are keen to be in". A telling example of the problematic implications for policy dialogue of the external judgment upon a country's political priorities is represented by the Declaration after the EU-Africa Summit held in Lisbon on December 8-9, 2007 which does not contain an explicit reference to fragile countries, although - notwithstanding the controversies over the definition and measurement of fragility - Sub-Saharan Africa always provides the majority of the countries which were classified under this label.[18]

The uneasy feeling associated with being labeled as fragile is also clearly connected with the great deal of discretion that any underlying definition involves and with partner countries' fear of stereotypes and stigmatization which can jeopardize their international image, climate investment, economic and development perspectives (Faria and Magalhães Ferreira, 2007). The negative reaction to the debate on fragility by these countries is also associated with the meaning that this expression has outside the development arena, where it is used - along with the stronger term failed - to designate the countries that represent threats to the international security. Moreover, countries might be concerned about the possible consequences for their sovereignty of international interventions driven by a strong emphasis on the security-development nexus. Some authors explicitly call for the adoption of a broader

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[16]The CPIA score also contains indicators of the economic vulnerability of a country, and this can have problematic analytical consequences when it is used - as in Naudé (2009) - to identify fragile states; specifically, the analysis of the the exposure of Sub-Saharan African countries to the effects of the recent global economic crisis in Naudé (2009) evidences that "most (although not all) of the African countries most at risk or at high risk are so-called fragile states", though this might be driven by the actual content of the underlying definition of fragility.

[17]The list of 58 countries forming *The Bottom Billion* was disclosed by the author two years later in Collier (2009).

[18]The Declaration, which is meant to lay the foundations for "a new strategic political partnership for the future", only mentioned that "Africa and the EU will also hold a dialogue on the concept of situations of fragility aimed at reaching a common understanding and agreeing on steps that could be taken".

set of tools, including military intervention, to deal with the development challenge that these countries pose.[19]

The reluctance by aid recipient countries to accept the label fragile, because of its intrinsically normative content and political sensitivity, could hinder the diplomatic dialogue with the donor community. To a certain extent, donors seem to be aware of this risk. Such a concern, for instance, might explain why the OECD DAC began to refer also to "situations of fragility", thus broadening its focus (OECD/DAC, 2007) and, in its *Principles for Good International Engagement*, made the statement that "a durable exit from poverty and insecurity for the world's most fragile states will need to be driven by their own leadership and people". The long-term goal of an engagement in these countries is "to *help national reformers* to build effective, legitimate, and resilient state institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people to promote sustained development" (OECD/DAC (2007), emphasis added). Even if this shift might be insufficient to fully eliminate the perception of being subject to an external discretionary and negative judgment, the reference to national reformers helps to convey the idea that overcoming fragility is a locally-owned process, which should respect people's right to self-determination, and which can only be marginally influenced by external actors.

3 Refinements in donors' understanding of fragility

The need to refine donors' understanding of fragility progressively led to a shift in the definition of the concept to a different approach with two key features: first, the focus on the *underlying causes* of the lack of capacity or political willingness[20] which gave rise to poor development outcomes and, second, a move to a *dynamic* interpretation of fragility.

Such a shift allowed to sharpen the analytical content of the concept of fragility, and it confronted the donors with the need to come to terms with "something that [they] are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge", namely that "fragility is a deeply political phenomenon" (Rocha Menocal, Othieno, and Evans, 2008). This second group of definitions, therefore, put the analysis of political dynamics at the center of the fragility debate, and it also points out that any assessment of state fragility has to account for the role of non-state actors, their

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[19]See, for instance, Bourguignon, Bénassy-Quére, Dercon, Estache, Gunning, Kanbur, Klasen, Maxwell, Platteau, and Spadaro (2008) and Collier (2009).

[20]Collier (2007) refers to the "pernicious intent" driving the action of fragile state institutions.

perceptions and their expectations towards state institutions. The nature and weakness of the sources of legitimacy, which are more intangible all less susceptible to measurement than state capacity, are therefore a pillar of analysis of state fragility. Finally, this group of definitions also entails, as we discuss below, a softening of the normative content of fragility, and more realistic perception of the extent to which fragility can be overcome through external engagement.

3.1 Unpacking the "explosive" black box of fragility

While outcome-based definitions of fragility referred to the relationship between a country and the donors' community,[21] later definitions turned inwards to domestic dynamics, their stability and their likelihood of falling into a violent conflict. The definition provided by the Council of the European Union (2007) is a case of such a shift, as "fragility refers to [...] situations where the social contract is broken". A similar definition is found in OECD/DAC (2008), which defines a fragile state "simply as one unable to meet its population's expectations or manage changes in expectations and capacity through the political process". Such a focus is in line with the argument by Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray (2008), who argue that the term "fragile state" should be used just to "delineate states only in terms of their likelihood of breaking-up or vulnerability to downside shocks", which is precisely what OECD/DAC (2008) does.

These definitions of state fragility contain a dynamic element and do not take a stance with respect to the actual content of the expectations held by the population. The reference to the social contract, which is the outcome of a never-ending bargaining process between the society and the state, reduces the extent to which fragility is measured against an externally given benchmark. OECD/DAC (2008) explicits that "whether and to what degree these expectations entail poverty reduction, development, security or human rights will depend on historical, cultural and other factors that shape state-society relations in specific contexts" (OECD/DAC, 2008).

Fragility is regarded as the inability to manage the perturbations that can affect changes

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[21]Some definitions, as World Bank (2009b) recalled above, explicitly related fragility to a country's (in)ability to effectively use donors' resources, though, as argued by Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray (2008), "if we associate fragility to aid effectiveness, *all* countries are fragile to the extent that their ability to use aid differs" (emphasis added).

in the expectations, or in the capacity of the state to meet them. The break-up of the equilibrium, which can occur when the misalignment between the capacity of a state and the expectations of the population grows too large, creates an element of instability and may lead to a conflict, which, in turn, represents the ultimate manifestation of fragility (see below on the relationship between fragility and conflict). State fragility, thus, refers to a condition of manifest or latent conflict and is conceived as the opposite of state resilience. As specified in the definition proposed by the Crisis State Research Centre, the opposite of a "fragile state" is a state "where dominant or statutory institutional arrangements appear able to withstand internal and external shocks and contestation remains within the boundaries of reigning institutional arrangements" (CRSC, 2006). The link between state fragility and conflict outbreaks is explicit also in the definition proposed by Ikpe (2007) who relates fragility to "the capacity of the state to adapt to changed circumstances, protect citizens, absorb shocks and manage conflict without resort to violence". Again, a recent OECD DAC report observes that a "fragile state has weak capacity to carry out basic functions of governing a population and its territory, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society" (OECD/DAC, 2011). Moving to the economic sphere, this approach is also close to the one described by Guillaumont and Guillaumont Jeanneney (2009), who portray fragility as the inability of a state to implement appropriate coping policies in the face of adverse shocks.

According to this approach, the debate around state fragility is closely intertwined with the literature on the causes of violent conflicts and social unrest. Indeed, several analyses of fragility which belong to this group also try to shed some light on the link between state features and political instability. The approach proposed by Stewart and Brown (2009), which can be regarded as a mediation between the outcome-based and dynamic notions of fragility, [22] is an example of this connection. Stewart and Brown (2009) distinguish three dimensions of state fragility, with respect to failure or risk of failing in authority, legitimacy and service entitlements.[23] Failure in the capacity of the state to ensure the provision of

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[22]Stewart and Brown (2009) emphasize that their approach to the measurement of fragility is intended to encompass a set of definitions proposed by development community.

[23]These three dimensions resemble the one provided by Carment, Prest, and Samy (2010), who consider authority, legitimacy and capacity, with the latter being defined as "the potential for a state to mobilize and employ resources towards productive ends", and the definition still has normative content in so far it requires to identify the set of services that the state should provide to the population.

comprehensive basic services represents a dimension of state fragility, as in the outcome-based approach, but Stewart and Brown (2009) do not focus only on the *average* level of the services which the state is able to provide, but also to their *distribution*. A state is regarded as fragile when there are sharp inequalities between culturally defined social groups with respect to service entitlements. The existence of horizontal inequalities (Stewart, 2001) makes a state fragile as these inequalities can give rise to civil conflicts: the grievances held by a social group which suffers from the outcome of an exclusionary political settlement can motivate rebellion, with the mobilization of an insurgent group being facilitated by the cohesion between the members of a group with a shared cultural identity (Stewart, 2008).[24]

The Crisis State Research Centre also focuses on the nexus between fragility, the risk of entering a spiral of violence and the distribution of political and economic power. Di John and Putzel (2009) argue that "the character and shape of political organisation has been decisive in determining whether a state moves towards resilience or fragility" on the basis of the country case studies conducted at the CSRC. States are fragile when they emerge from exclusionary *political settlements*, which determine an unequal access to resources among various social groups. Here, the key to interpreting fragility is the concept of political settlement, defined as "the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes". (Di John and Putzel, 2009), and a notion of state as a dynamic set of power relationships (see also Hameiri (2010)). As noted by OECD/DAC (2010), "states are never "neutral actors", but rather embody within their institutions and organisations unequal power relations and sources of conflict. [Any state] is based on a political settlement that represents a balance of power between distinct groups and interests within a society" (OECD/DAC, 2010). Hence, any attempt to overcome state fragility requires to "support inclusive political settlements" (DFID, 2009), as inclusive political settlements are crucial to ensure the *legitimacy* of state institutions, thus improving their ability to react and adjust to shocks.

This approach has two main consequences. From a theoretical point of view, the concept of fragility refers to a notion of the state that is drastically different from that one implied in the outcome-based approach: the state is not only a set of institutional arrangements

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[24]See Blattman and Miguel (2010) for a survey of greed- and grievance-based explanations of internal armed conflicts; Collier and Hoeffler (2004) criticize the empirical relevance of grievance-based theories of civil wars, though they use measures of interpersonal rather than horizontal inequalities in their econometric analysis.

and actors that perform a list of "core functions" to be compared to an ideal functioning of the state, but it has a political and highly contentious character. In operational terms, this translates in a different approach to external engagement. Donor interventions are not purely technical actions aiming at fostering capacity building,[25] but they are intrinsically political as they interact with and influence internal political dynamics. Such an approach, therefore, entails a closer attention to political scope and effects of state-building, aid and development cooperation policies. This perspective is reflected in DFID (2009), which argues that "conflict and fragility are inherently political [and] their solutions must be rooted in politics".[26] Moreover, if the focus is on the link between state weakness and the risks of entering into a spiral of violence, as well as to the causes of "lack of political will" (OECD/DAC, 2006) which can be the outcome of a political settlement which is functional to the interests of the elites, actions to overcome fragility should identify and promote the main sources of state resilience meant as those factors which strengthen trust and mutual obligations between the state and its citizens and which help the peaceful coexistence of conflicting interests.

The dispute around the concept of state fragility, therefore, is not just an academic and intellectual exercise, but it has a salient content with respect to policy design. According to Putzel (2010), for instance, donors' definitions can induce development actors to miss the signs of fragility and of vulnerability to crisis or even to promote reforms and policies that exacerbate fragility (such as a premature introduction of elections, demobilisation or privatisation of security forces). Donors should prioritize those state attributes - such as territorial control, monopoly of the legitimate use of violence and taxation power, state capacity to command authority - that are most likely to prevent conflicts, or to reconcile and manage contestations from non-state actors or between power groups.

The definition of a fragile state by the Crisis State Research Centre also regards some economic, institutional and political characteristics (factionalism or fragmented security organisations, extreme inequality, institutions that reinforce stagnation) that are reflective of

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[25]A telling example of this approach is provided by Ghani, Lockhart, and Carnahan (2005) who propose a specific list of core state functions so that "the progress of or decline in state capabilities to perform each function severally as well as collectively can be assessed". In this way, the international community can evaluate the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty which characterizes fragile countries.

[26]This statement suggests that donors, albeit possibly reluctantly as suggested by Rocha Menocal, Othieno, and Evans (2008), did progressively acknowledged the political character of their engagement with fragile states.

exclusionary political settlements as sources of fragility (CRSC, 2006). Di John (2008) suggests to focus on institutional mechanisms of distributing patronage: centralized patronage and rule would reduce the likelihood of large-scale challenges to state authority in comparison to fragmented systems where horizontal inequalities assume a greater political meaning since "winner-takes-all" rules are more common and "divide and conquer" strategies are less difficult.

From a different perspective, Pouligny (2010) observes that donors' policies, by prioritizing only state capacity and the "mere forms of institutions", could overlook important social and cultural elements that actually underpin the functioning of the state. By adhering to a dynamic notion of state fragility which has to be interpreted in the light of state-society relations, Pouligny (2010) underscores that cooperation programmes should provide a greater support to what she refers as the "intangible dimension" of state resilience. That is, the role of collective values, perceptions and expectations attached to the state should deserve more attention since legitimacy is central to sustain peace and ensure the effective functioning of the state.

A strengthening of state institutions should not only be limited to what concerns the capacity of state institutions, but also to their perceived legitimacy. Restoring or creating capacity is a necessary but *per se* not sufficient condition to overcome the fragility which emerges from the relationship between the state capacity and the expectations held by the various social groups. Externally-driven improvements in development outcomes which are not perceived as being the result of state interventions, would produce little to no effect on the legitimacy of state institutions, which should be pursued even at the cost of a lower effectiveness. This also leads us to another implication of the second group of definitions we have identified. The emphasis on the procedural and dynamic dimensions of fragility suggests that the efforts to promote state resilience cannot prescind from the essential role of non-state actors. As noted, by Engberg-Pedersen, Andersen, and Stepputat (2008), a narrow focus on the strengthening of the capacity and legitimacy of the state to abide by the social contract could be ill founded, due to the crucial functions performed by non-state actors in situations of fragility.

3.2 The role of non-state actors

State fragility pivots on state functioning; still, it is no longer evaluated with respect to international development goals, but rather in relation to the state's ability to mediate, settle, meet - either converging or conflicting - expectations and claims expressed at different levels of the social structure (families, clans, political parties, multinational and domestic enterprises). The legitimacy of state instituions, as argued in OECD/DAC (2010), results for the interaction of a complex array of factors, it can have multiple sources and its relationship with their capacity is not linear.[27] This entails that we need to broaden the focus of the analysis beyond the boundaries of the state in order to have a proper understanding of whether this is fragile or not, assessing its relationship with non-state actors. Non-state actors play a leading role in shaping the institutional framework of a country. The gradual acknowledgment that fragility debate goes beyond the exclusive focus on the state institutions is reflected in the increasing use of the term "situations of fragility" (OECD/DAC, 2007; ODI, 2010; Putzel, 2010).

Engberg-Pedersen, Andersen, and Stepputat (2008) define a situation of fragility as "institutional instability undermining the predictability, transparency and accountability of public decision processes and the provision of security and social services to the population". Public decision processes are not confined within the boundaries of the state, as "in fragile situations where the state is absent or very weak, non-state authorities often perform state-like functions with respect to the provision of security and social services" (Engberg-Pedersen, Andersen, and Stepputat, 2008).[28]

This definition is based upon the recognition that multiple authorities can be perceived as legitimate, and multiple sources of service provision can coexist in a given territory, as evidenced by Batley and Mcloughlin (2010) and, with respect to the provision of security and justice, by Baker (2010).[29] Böge, Brown, Clements, and Nolan (2008) summarize this

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[27]The expectation that an improved capacity leads to a stronger legitimacy is misleading, as it would again blur the distinction between underdevelopment and fragility; Stewart and Brown (2009) find only a partial correlation between the measures of legitimacy and service entitlements, two of their proposed three dimensions of fragility.

[28]Many examples of non-state systems of provision of security, justice and basic social services in Afghanistan, Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Timor Leste are illustrated by Scheye (2006).

[29]DFID (2009) includes security and access to justice among basic services, "on a par with health and education".

arguments referring to fragile statehood as *hybrid political orders* where the state "has to share authority, legitimacy and capacity with other structures". While this is not a cause of instability *per se*, when the interactions, interests, and governance forms of these non-state groups and institutions are irreconcilable with each other, or beyond the control of the state and in opposition to it, the existing formal and informal institutional arrangements are in a situation of fragility. It follows that state building and development programmes in fragile situations should incorporate local stakeholder perspectives, understanding and systems of governance as well as take into account existing local capacities and norms (Pouligny, 2010).

Along the same lines, González Aimé (2008) criticises the view of societies as "passive victims rather than political actors", in what she considers the prevailing conceptual and analytical framework applied in the design of international development assistance towards fragile countries. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be well-functioning institutions which external actors should not ignore once they engage in the country, even in what is a clear case of state collapse.[30] The role of local political actors, which could act either as spoilers or as drivers of change, need to be carefully analysed and understood, in order to assess what the scope of external engagement is, and what its chances of success are. A key challenge is to understand how to leverage the local models of governance and the role of non-state actors in providing services to the population while at the same time strenghtening the capacity and legitimacy of state institutions and avoiding a romantic vision of informal and traditional systems.[31]

The recommendation to engage with non-state service providers, with local populations,

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[30]For instance, the provision of law and order in Somalia, the text-book case of state fragility, is ensured by the so-called Islamic courts, and "shari'a courts perform an instrumental function in creating legal order under anarchy, dispute resolution is free and speedy by international standards", as Leeson (2007) observes. The author argues that, though the current condition is far from being ideal, it has, nevertheless, improved, compared to the pre-1991 situation, and this is not limited to the judicial system. The *Human Development Report 2001 - Somalia* observes that, there were more primary schools in the country in the early 2000s than in the late 1980s, and the private sector has been effective also in the provision of water and electricity (UNDP, 2001).

[31]Batley and Mcloughlin (2010) offer a key contribution in this respect, as they suggest that one should distinguish between the *delivery* of services, and their *provision*: state building requires a greater involvement of public institutions in the provision of services, as the state should take the responsability to perform some *indirect* functions of regulating and coordinating service providers, which need not to be absorbed by the public sector.

administrations and authorities represents a specific case of a more general principle, namely the need for donors to design their interventions on a solid-grounded understanding of the local context (ODI, 2010; Call and Cousens, 2008), and to consider local institutions and traditions as a possible resource for contributing to the establishment of resilient institutions (Kaplan, 2008).

Finally, conceiving the functioning of the state, not *per se* but in relation to multiple layers of institutional arrangements, norms, perceptions and actors, leads to more realistic expectations towards the scope and effects of external programs. If donors' actions interact with and are mediated by the existing political settlements, their effectiveness are likely to be limited and their effects can be different from that initially planned. This leads to reduce expectations towards attempts of social and political engineering as well as to a more careful attention to unintended and damaging impacts.

4   Concluding remarks

The discourse around state fragility is still unfolding and some theoretical ambiguities remain; nevertheless it has already produced a number of valuable contributions for the development community. This debate played an important advocacy role, emphasizing the side effects of the PBA-system and of the poverty-efficient allocation paradigm which have been adopted by the donor community. Econometric estimates by Feeny and McGillivray (2009) demonstrate that many fragile countries, identified on the basis of the CPIA score, were under-aided also relatively to their *low* ability to convert aid efficiently into economic growth. The bad neighbor effects due to fragility (Chauvet and Collier, 2004; Collier, 2007) further reinforce the case for bringing donors' focus back to the countries that pose the most severe development challenges (Zoellick, 2008), as aid can contribute to increase the chance for a sustained institutional turnaround (Chauvet and Collier, 2008).

The early approaches to the definition of fragility had the merit to voice this call for action, although the challenge for donors was not just to scale-up aid, but also to improve its effectiveness. Achieving this objective was difficult because of the great heterogeneity of the countries labeled as fragile, which created the need to adapt modalities of intervention to context-specific priorities, institutional settings and underlying political settlements. This, in turn, indirectly cast doubts on the operational relevance of the identification of a group of

fragile countries.[32] The limited value added in the identification of a group of fragile countries is not related to the - admittedly controversial in itself (DIE and UNDP, 2009) - challenge of translating a definition of fragility an objective measurement,[33] but it follows from the fact that "a rigorous distinction between fragile and non-fragile states seems unsustainable" (Engberg-Pedersen, Andersen, and Stepputat, 2008), as fragility "is found in all but the most developed and institutionalised states" (OECD/DAC, 2008).

If it is impossible to credibly draw a line that separates fragile from non fragile countries, this has three distinct relevant implications. First, fragility should be regarded as a developmental dimension rather than as a basis for the categorisation of aid recipients. Second, some of the lessons that the development community has learned retain their validity in all the contexts where donors intervene. The identification of the best practices in the implementation of aid policies in fragile states by Manor (2007) moved from the hypothesis that "the approaches widely-used by donors in countries that are not fragile states would be inappropriate in the extremely difficult environments examined here", while this was "true, but only to a limited extent. Many well-accepted principles and strategies have proved their worth in these countries, although they often need some adjustment". Along the same lines, Brinkerhoff (2007) observed that "the immense pressure to act quickly in failed states has led to the widespread impression that post-conflict intervention strategies share little with long-term development approaches", while "lessons from the wider development experience" should be incorporated into policy design.

The final remark in the quote from Manor (2007) is related to the third crucial implication, namely that state fragility requires the donors to pursue approaches which are tailor-made for each specific context, as state fragility varies both in time and across space. This requirement is consistent with the evolution of donors' understanding of state fragility, which became progressively aware that any attempt to overcome fragility has a deeply political content (DFID, 2009), as fragility is not related to the distance between the actual institutional setting of a country and its idealized version but rather to the underlying political settlement that shapes state institutions. This is why any external engagement needs

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[32]Many contributions on fragile countries introduce more specific taxonomies of fragile countries or situations of fragility once it comes to choosing from among the alternative strategies of interventions; see, for instance, the discussion about budget support in OECD/DAC (2008).

[33]As recalled above, the use of this label also created major obstacles to the policy dialogue with aid recipients.

to be based on a solid-grounded understanding of the local context, of the distribution of power among contending elites, and of the interactions between state and non-state actors. This understanding is all the more necessary as the literature evidenced possible tensions between the security, stability and development agendas, which required "to go beyond rhetorical assumptions that all interventions are mutually reinforcing or even compatible" (ODI, 2010).[34]

The necessary knowledge of the local context of intervention can only be achieved if the major actors in the development community understand that it is necessary "to consider a higher ratio of donor personnel to resources spent that is commonly implemented in their development assistance programmes" (OECD/DAC, 2010), a priority that has been emphasized also by ODI (2010) and Call and Cousens (2008). This requires a major change with respect to common practices, as "the World Bank has large offices in every middle-income country but not a single person resident in the Central African Republic" (Collier, 2007), and there are often major difficulties related to keep qualified personnel operating in fragile situations (Pantuliano, 2009).[35]

A deep knowledge of the local political situation is a necessary - though not sufficient - condition to adhere to a basic principle for external engagement, namely "Do No Harm" (OECD/DAC, 2010). The title of this report reveals another important lesson from the debate around state fragility, namely the need to dismiss overoptimistic expectations about what donors can achieve. OECD/DAC (2010) warns that external engagement can not only be ineffective, but it could even end up worsening the situation of fragility that it is expected to tackle. To rephrase Easterly (2006), overcoming state fragility does not pertain to "the White Man's Burden", but the growing debate that we reviewed in this paper is offering relevant insights with respect to what the development community could - or should not - do to support a dynamic of change which is driven by local actors.

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[34]See OECD/DAC (2010, 2011) and Brinkerhoff (2010) for a review of the major policy dilemmas that donors face, and for possible approaches to mitigate them.

[35]A telling example of the difficulty of such a change is offered in the Introduction to OECD/DAC (2010) itself, where it is specified that "research was undertaken in the capital cities of all countries; but time, resources and, in some cases, security conditions prohibited undertaking research beyond the capital".

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