



Effective development policies for fragile states Turning fragility into strength

States which fail to serve their citizens present a major development policy challenge. What can be done to put fragile countries on a sustainable development path? Experts and practitioners from across Europe gathered in Barcelona to look for answers.

What causes countries to become fragile? What effect does this have on development? What policies are needed to help fragile states prevail? These were among the issues being considered at the third gathering of leading development experts from Europe held in the context of the 2009 European Report on Development (ERD).

Hosted by the Centre for Research on the Economies of the Mediterranean (CREMed), ‘The challenges of fragility to development policy’ took place at Barcelona’s ultra-modern Pompeu Fabra University on 7 and 8 May 2009. The first day focused on building a better understanding of fragility, its causes and its consequences. The second day was dedicated to discussing new avenues of development policy that could help move countries away from fragility.

Following a brief outline of the ERD and its 2009 focus, delivered by lead author Giorgia Giovannetti and the European Commission’s Françoise Moreau, the assembled researchers, academics, policy-makers and field workers first turned their attentions to defining and measuring fragility.

A measure of the situation

A number of speakers pointed out that fragility is an elusive concept, with different actors applying [different definitions](#). The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) definition of ‘fragile’ countries, as those which “cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people”, is perhaps the simplest and most straightforward.

This makes measurement a tricky task. “Fragility, as a concept, relates to policy, and involves subjective and changing assessments. It is difficult to measure but necessary,” [noted](#) Patrick Guillaumont of CERDI, the University of Auvergne’s centre for international development research.

Paul Collier of Oxford University offered his own views: “Fragile states are too large to be a nation [i.e. are ethnically diverse] and too small to be a state [i.e. have tiny economies].”

One clear message that emerged from the conference is that fragility applies to an extremely heterogeneous group of countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, there are some 30 countries – experiencing very different socio-economic situations and challenges – which qualify as ‘fragile’. In fact, as Stephan Klasen of the University of Göttingen discovered, “There is remarkably little correlation between fragility and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals”, if we take into account the fact that fragile countries often started from a much lower base point.

The talks, presentations and papers presented at the conference reflected this diversity, examining such aspects as the influence of [natural resources](#), climate, [transitory economic shocks](#), [ethnicity](#) and [religion](#) on fragility.

Away from fragility

On the second day, speakers and participants dedicated a lot of energy to exploring the development policy implications of fragility. Françoise Moreau from the European Commission got the ball rolling by [outlining](#) the EU’s current work on fragility, which will lead to greater coordination between Member States, as well as a more coherent and strategic approach when dealing with such complex situations.

There emerged a general consensus that conventional approaches to aid delivery need to be radically rethought in situations of fragility, especially the relationship between donor countries and recipient governments.

Security is often the greatest immediate challenge facing fragile states, particularly those in conflict or just out of it. Therefore, finding effective mechanisms for guaranteeing security is essential, a number of participants urged.

Other suggestions for helping countries move beyond fragility included the promotion of greater regional co-operation, as well as the development of more responsible and transparent mechanisms for international trade in natural resources to ensure that it is a help not a hindrance to development.

Closing the conference, the ERD team leader Giorgia Giovannetti stressed that the European Union, as the world’s number one donor and given its own internal track record of promoting stability and development, was well placed to make a difference.

Further information:

[Conference programme and papers](#)

[ERD website](#)