

PRACTICE NOTE

Fragile and Conflict-Affected States: Exploring the Relationship Between Governance, Instability and Violence

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'Fragile and conflict-affected states' (FCAS) constitute an increasingly important category of aid policy and action. But the category comprises a large and heterogeneous set of countries, problematizing coherent policy response which is often awkwardly split between boilerplate strategy and case-by-case approach. In both respects, efficiency of aid allocations is questionable. There is a need to disaggregate the category into smaller groups of countries, understood according to a more nuanced interpretation of the nature of their fragility. Disaggregation, however, is challenging insofar as it is hard to find a stable reference point internal to the category by which states' relative performance – and causes of performance – can be determined. An alternative approach is to seek a reference point external to the entire FCAS category – for example a multilateral initiative – which allows us to explore systematic differences between those who sign up and those who do not. This research took the UN's Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) initiative as such a mechanism. Splitting FCAS into two groups – those who had joined SUN within its initial two-year phase and those who had not – we reviewed a range of social, economic, political, institutional and conflict/instability indicators to identify areas of significant difference. An unexpected finding was that while SUN-joiners performed statistically better on governance, there was no difference between joiners and non-joiners on the level of instability and violence they suffered, suggesting that some countries, even at high levels of conflict disruption, can achieve areas of relatively good governance.

Introduction

The concept of 'fragile and conflict-affected states' (FCAS) is an increasingly powerful organising idea in the policies and actions of donors and aid agencies (World Bank 2014; OECD 2013; Rice & Patrick 2008; Woodward 2004; Collier et al 2003).¹ But it is also a deeply problematic taxonomy, embracing a range

of countries in very different circumstances from Kenya to Afghanistan. Intuitively, there is a question about the extent to which commonalities can be asserted across this spectacularly heterogeneous spectrum, and hence how well the category serves as a framework for coherent and evidence-driven policy and intervention. FCAS implies both overt crisis (organised conflict and violent disruption of socio-political processes), and latent fragmentation (contested political

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settlement, state predation, and failure to ensure basic rights and services). Net effects include loss of regime legitimacy, control of the use of force and provision of security, and inability or unwillingness to provide for basic livelihood conditions (DFID 2011; Stewart & Brown 2009; Mata & Ziaja 2009; OECD 2007; Collier & Hoeffler 2004). Most FCAS manifest some, often quite nuanced, combination of these problems.

In many fragile and conflict-affected contexts, donors' commitment to work with and through recipient governments is tempered by an over-arching concern to protect aid allocations (under an increasing intensity of taxpayer scrutiny at home), and to demonstrate tangible outcomes relevant to immediate dimensions of humanitarian crisis. Protection of aid allocations is – explicitly or implicitly – derived from an anxiety among donors that government in fragile and conflict-affected states is axiomatically weak. And based on that assumption, appetite for short-run visible impact in FCAS situations encourages donors to package aid in relatively short-term grants with a relatively heavy emphasis on direct financing through non-state actors (principally international NGOs and their local civil society counterparts).

The assumption that government capacity is generally weak in states classed as fragile and conflict-affected – and that the combined effect of government incapacity and ambient insecurity legitimise a continuing reliance on short-term humanitarian intervention managed by non-government actors – should be closely and continuously interrogated, in individual country contexts but also at a broader level of the FCAS category as a whole. If this fundamental assumption is less sound than might intuitively appear, the potential costs in terms of foregone aid value – whether through over-emphasis on humanitarian modes of assistance that are in themselves unsustainable, or through associated failure to invest in the institutions of the state as the only genuine route to sustainable long-run national recovery and development – will likely be very high.

A key imperative in developing more evidence-driven policy in the area of FCAS is to understand, with a sufficiently nuanced empirical method, the nature of fragility as it is manifested through forms of governance, instability and conflict and – critically – the degree of interaction between these phenomena (Stewart 2008). A key challenge in attempting to get at this understanding by comparing conditions in different FCAS is that, often, the variables selected are either too generalised or too context-specific to allow for much meaningful comparison, especially where two of the foundational parameters – 'governance' and 'conflict' (or, worse, 'violence') – are broad, debated and hard to quantify in ways that allow for comparative analysis. The absence of a reliable, commonly agreed reference point, within the FCAS category, by which more nuanced differentiation of performance among them (and consequently of more targeted definition of intervention strategy) can be established results in over-generalisations about fragility, and an over-emphasis on ranking systems which, whilst they allow for a retrospective understanding of overall change in relative status, do little to help frame proactive policy and intervention (Fearon 2010).²

Our research approached the FCAS category from a slightly different angle. Originating in an investigation of how fragile and conflict-affected states were responding to the 2010 multilateral initiative dedicated to 'Scaling Up Nutrition' (SUN), we appropriated formal accession to the SUN movement in its initial 2-year phase as an independent reference point, external to all FCAS, against which (distinguishing fragile states as accessionary (SUN) or non-accessionary (non-SUN)) we could then systematically assess a range of social, economic, political and conflict/insecurity variables across the two groups of countries, looking for patterns of difference. Rather than starting from an *a priori* assumption of 'fragility,' our approach attempts to understand FCAS countries through the prism of their response to an

objective problem (undernutrition) and a collective, external policy opportunity (SUN).

Scaling Up Nutrition in Fragile and Conflict-affected States

The Scaling Up Nutrition initiative was launched in 2010, as a high-level multilateral 'movement' dedicated to engaging states in renewed efforts to address the twin problems of acute and chronic undernutrition. All states are eligible to join the initiative (through a relatively simple submission of ministerial or equivalent demarche to the Geneva-based secretariat). By the end of 2012 (at the end of the first 2-year phase), fragile and conflict-affected states constituted a little under half of the countries signed up to SUN. This was considered potentially problematic, insofar as FCAS have some of the highest rates of both acute and chronic undernutrition in the world (Sarma 2011; Horton et al 2010; Guha-Sapir et al 2005; Brennan & Nandy 2001).³

Undernutrition is important not only as a humanitarian imperative and a structural barrier to economic development, but as a threat to peace and security in and of itself. Acute food shortages are strongly associated with civil unrest. At a deeper level, chronically malnourished children perform less well at school, are more often unemployed, and earn less over their lifetimes of economic activity. As a result – poorer, economically excluded and cognitively disadvantaged – they become the kinds of young adults on whose relative deprivation crime, social fragmentation and recruitment to militia and insurgent causes thrive. As such, the orientation of FCAS countries to SUN can be read as a matter of significant interest from the perspective of long-run socioeconomic and political stability.

Methodology

We selected a set of 42 fragile and conflict-affected states, based on their inclusion in at least two of the three leading international institutional FCAS listings.⁴ We selected a range of 27 variables, bundled into six

'dimensions' conceptualised as reflective of key issues in FCAS contexts, and relevant to the likelihood of an individual state's policy orientation to an initiative like SUN. These were: 1) health and nutrition outcomes; 2) health system function; 3) economic performance; 4) civil society activity; 5) governance and government function; & 6) intensity of conflict and instability. We used bivariate regression and principal component analysis to identify associations among the variables against the outcomes 'SUN' or 'non-SUN'.⁵

We hypothesised that association between health, economic and civil society variables and propensity of a fragile state to join an initiative like SUN could run in either direction (that is, higher rates of undernutrition, for example, could incentivise a state to join SUN in the hope of additional support and resources to address the problem, but could just as well deter the same state from joining as a means of avoiding exposure of politically embarrassing failure to provide food to the population). Conversely, we hypothesised that higher levels of governance should correlate uniquely and positively with joining SUN, while higher levels of violence and insecurity would correlate, in a reverse manner, with not joining.

Results

Our first, fairly straightforward observation is that the FCAS category includes a strikingly large variation in country performance on a range of indicators of human development, service infrastructure and economic growth. The rate of neonatal mortality across study countries ranges from over 50 to under 5 per 1,000 live births (**figure 1**). The rate of pregnant women accessing institutional delivery ranges from 100 per cent (Bosnia Herzegovina) to 5 per cent (Ethiopia) (**figure 2**). The rate of per capita GNI ranges from over US\$9,000 (Bosnia) to US\$330 (Liberia); and within the main cluster of values, we still see a ten-fold variation, for example between the Republic of Congo (US\$3,280) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (US\$310) (**figure 3**).

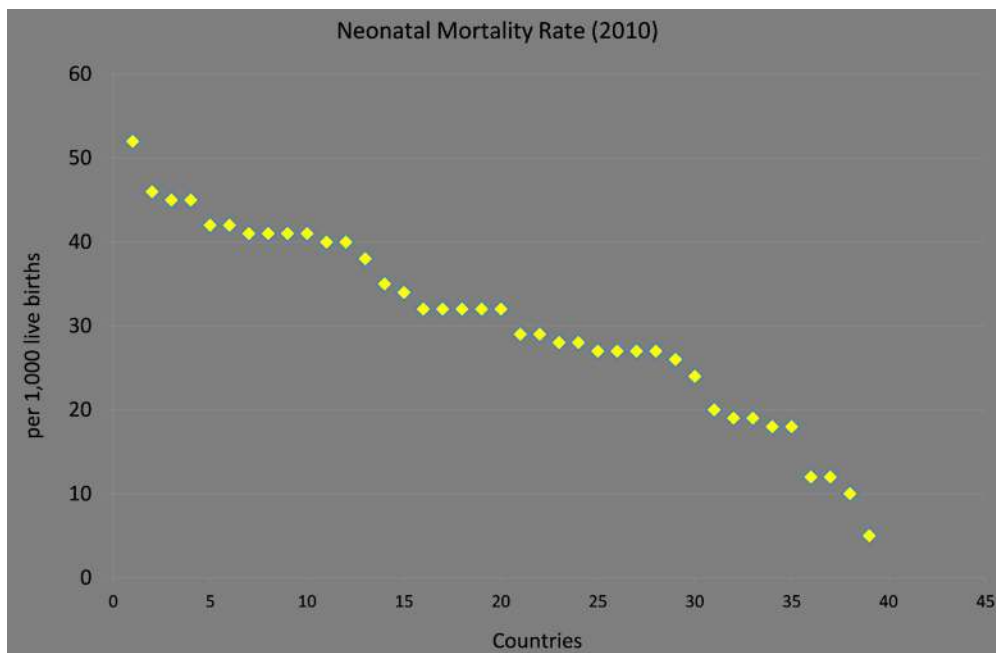


Figure 1: Neonatal mortality rate (2010), all FCAS.

Comparing SUN FCAS with non-SUN FCAS, we found little statistical difference in the dimensions of health, economic performance and civil society activity. But, using the World Bank’s ‘Country Policy and Institutional Assessment’ (CPIA) dataset, we found a large and significant difference between them in the dimension of governance. These findings suggest that engagement with SUN was driven more strongly by what we may call the policy ‘supply-side’ (interest and capacity within government) rather than from the ‘demand-side’ constituted, for example, by the scale of population undernutrition, or level of organised public pressure for action. Internal government capacity and performance appeared to be pivotal in determining fragile states’ orientation, as reflected in the external multilateral domain, to a critical humanitarian and developmental issue in the domestic space.

Recognising however that CPIA may be viewed as a particular perspective on governance (focusing quite heavily on internal quality of core government functions), we also drew on the Worldwide Governance

Indicators (WGI), in particular their ‘*Effectiveness of Government*’ and ‘*Political Stability and Absence of Violence*’ indices, on the grounds that the former, incorporating a wide range of independent measures of governance including external (public) perceptions of government service provision, would complement (or add analytical depth to) the more bureaucratic CPIA data, while the latter would provide continuous data on the dimension of violence and insecurity.

When we compared the CPIA and *Effectiveness of Government* scores across all FCAS in our selection, we found a reasonably strong level of agreement between the two indices (**figure 4**), suggesting that CPIA’s measures of internal government functionality correspond quite well with the public experience of government behaviour in key domains such as service provision.

But when we compared CPIA and *Political Stability and Absence of Violence* scores, we found no systematic correspondence (**figure 5**).

We recognise that this is a somewhat rudimentary analysis, and one that should be viewed as the starting point for more

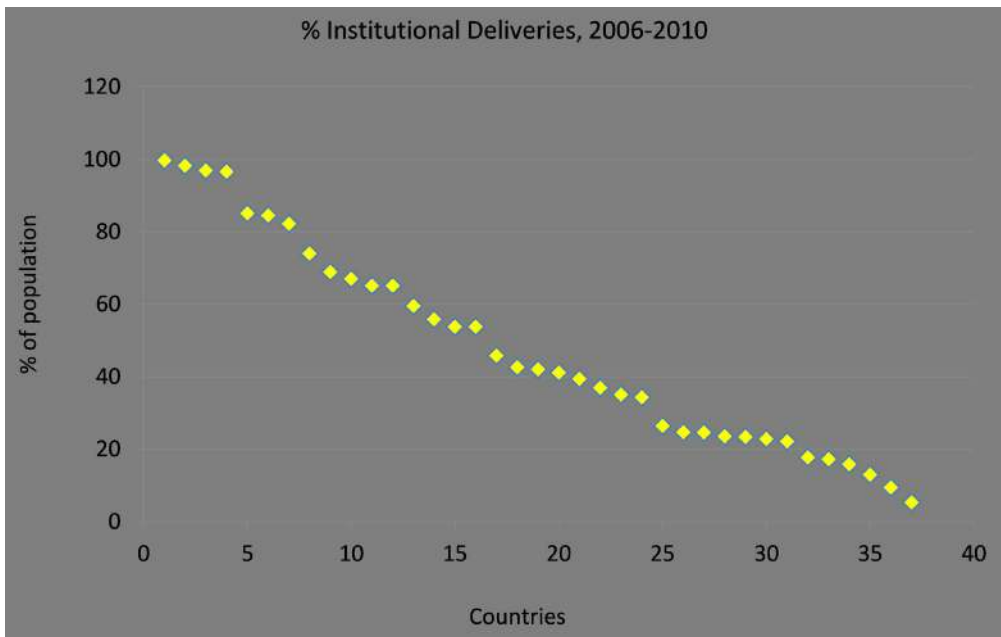


Figure 2: Proportion of pregnant women accessing institutional delivery, 2006–10, all FCAS.

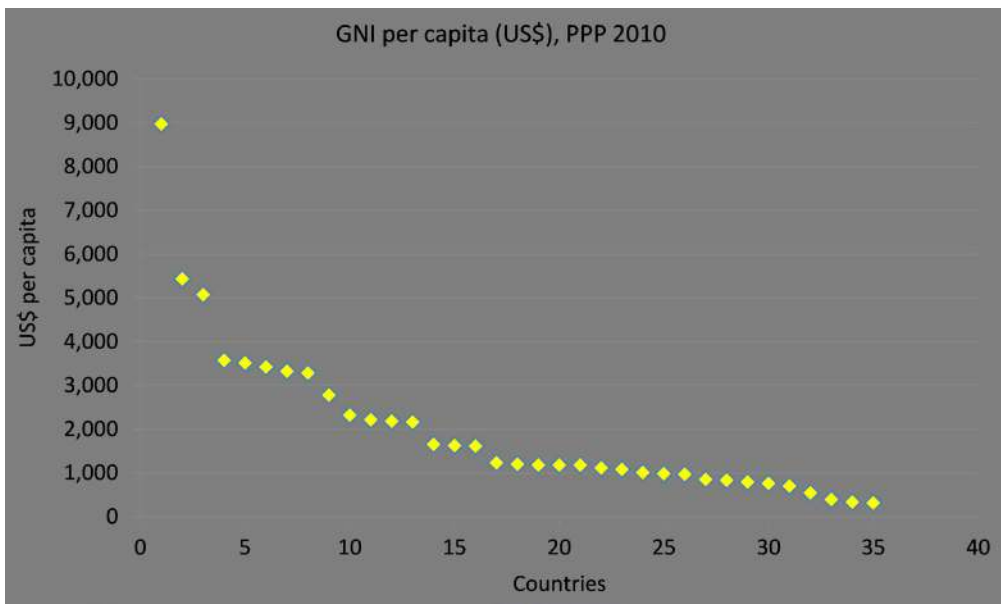


Figure 3: Per capita GNI (US\$, 2010PPP), all FCAS.

detailed investigation. However, the implication is that, whilst the internal quality of governance functions map quite well onto wider perception measures of government effectiveness, the same quality of governance

does not appear to correlate in any clear sense with the level of stability or of prevailing violence in a given fragile state.

In order to triangulate this finding, we looked at SUN and non-SUN scores on both

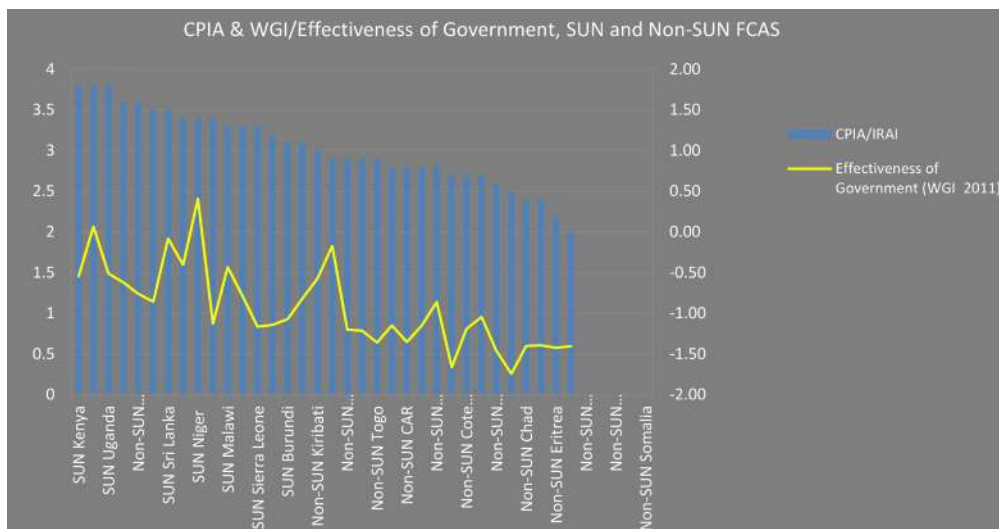


Figure 4: CPIA and WGI/Effectiveness of Government, SUN and non-SUN FCAS combined.

Effectiveness of Government and Political Stability and Absence of Violence. We found that there was quite a marked difference in effectiveness of government between the two country groups, with SUN states performing considerably better than non-SUN (figure 6).

But again, when we compared SUN and non-SUN scores on stability and violence, we found no systematic difference (figure 7), suggesting that some fragile states were able to activate the necessary government and governance apparatus to coordinate and then navigate accession to the SUN initiative, in a sense irrespective of the ambient level of instability and/or violence.

This is a tentative finding – one that, as we have emphasised, could be used as the basis for further, more focused research. However, it points towards the empirical possibility that government can remain effective (or achieve effectiveness in some respects) even in the midst of instability and violent disruption.

Conclusion

Improving governance is critical to sustained improvement in states’ ability to acknowledge, understand and respond to their populations’ needs – and, therein, to secure their populations’ willingness to

grant government compliance and stability. Improving governance in fragile states is, on paper, a clear commitment among donors. In practice, though, assumptions about weak governance and risk to aid in such environments continue to constrain real support to the state in its various institutional forms (Knack 2014; Knack 2013; OECD 2013; World Bank 2011; Mlamboa et al 2009; Østby 2008; Grindle 2007; Maunders & Wiggins 2007; Burnside & Dollar 2000).

There are, without question, examples of donor effort to engage with and strengthen FCAS governments – for example multi-donor pooled or sectoral funding mechanisms and investment in institutional reforms like Public Financial Management (PFM). But such efforts to coordinate and invest aid in FCAS government capacity and ownership have had variable and often disappointing results and are, in any case, frequently applied somewhat experimentally within a broader policy framework of short-term humanitarian aid modalities that continue largely to bypass government control (de Renzio, Andrews & Mills 2011; Barakat 2009). New analysis from the World Bank and others suggests that, even where project investments in FCAS contexts out-perform equivalent investments in non-fragile

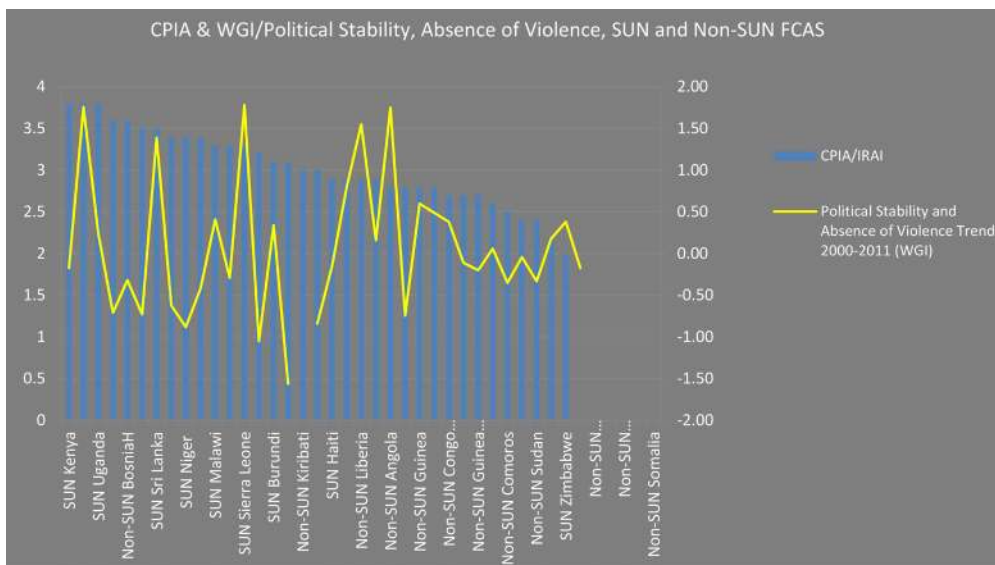


Figure 5: CPIA and WGI/Political Stability, Absence of Violence, SUN and non-SUN FCAS combined.

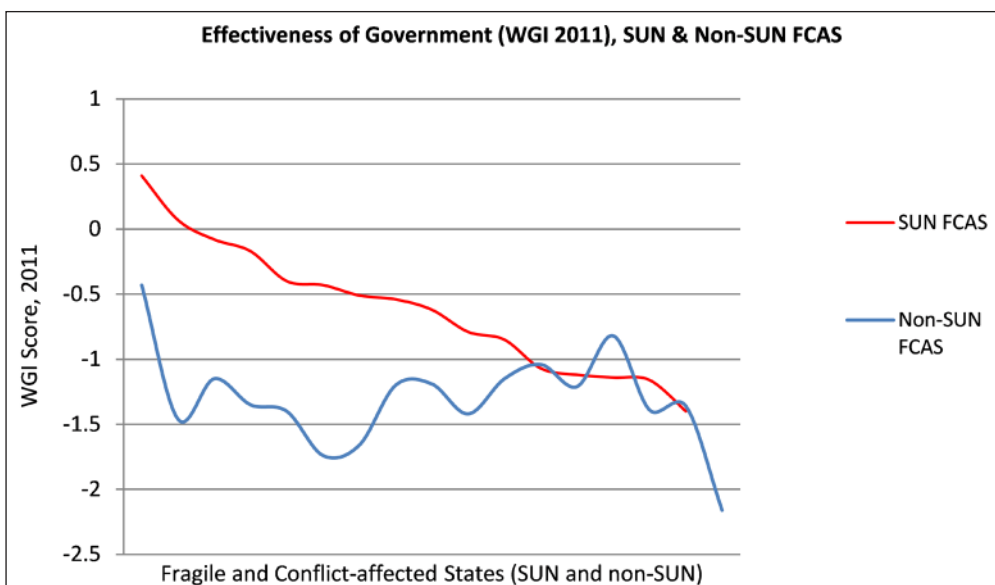


Figure 6: Effectiveness of Government, SUN and non-SUN FCAS compared.

environments, these outcomes do not reliably correlate with evidence of strengthening government capacity.⁶ In major investment areas such as food and nutrition, donor behaviour remains heavily organised around short-term, projectised disbursements, controlled at the level of individual sector

budgets, or running entirely outside government ownership and management (Torjesen 2013; Brinkman & Hendrix 2012; Compton et al 2011; Rose & Greeley 2006).

By contrast, donors have shown increasing willingness to flow aid through national governance systems in pursuit of security

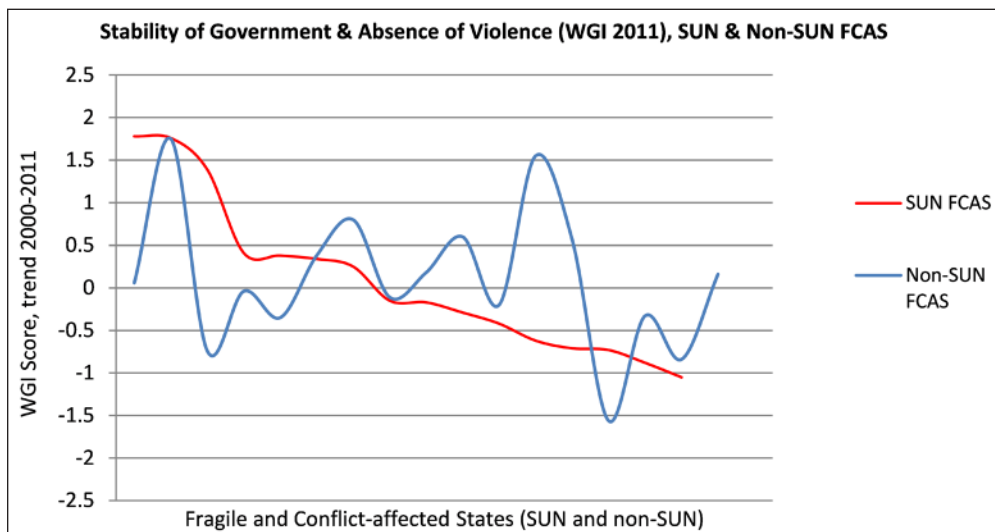


Figure 7: Political Stability and Absence of Violence, SUN and non-SUN FCAS compared.

sector reform – ostensibly based on the increasingly influential view that development in FCAS contexts is the consequence, rather than the source, of security.⁷ In this ‘security first’ paradigm, long-run investment in government, governance and structural capacity to deliver welfare and services tends to be seen as the *sequitur* of re-established stability and security, rather than as a strategy for building peace in and of itself (Rubenstein 2011; Government of the Netherlands 2011; OECD 2010; Justino 2009; Brinkerhoff 2008; Wagstaff & Watanabe 1999). A security-first approach – investing in the state’s capacity to control violence and enforce its authority across the national space – may achieve short-term stabilisation goals. But in the absence of structural commitment and capacity to drive progressive investments in human development and human security, it may fail to secure the long-term stability which grows out of an adequate social contract (Amer, Swain & Ojendal 2012).

Our research – albeit in a rudimentary fashion at this stage – suggests that core assumptions about governance and instability – and the possibility of effective government in these circumstances – should be urgently reviewed. The sometimes overwhelming

scepticism regarding government capacity to provide governance in FCAS is often as unwise as it is poorly-informed. One thing we know from the current classification of ‘fragile and conflict-affected states’ is that the category includes a broad spectrum of conditions – from states with relatively robust systems but political or regime instability, to states with extreme limits on sovereignty or capacity. Rarely, however, can a fragile state do nothing. Indeed, the very malleability of state institutions in periods of instability can be viewed as an opportunity – rather than necessarily a risk – for positive external influence (Torjesen 2013; Cheng 2012; Berdal & Mousavizadeh 2010). If donors and partners are serious about the Busan commitments (and everything that predates them), they are obligated to seek out and nurture those aspects of state in which FCAS governments show themselves willing and able in spite of social, economic, political and military challenges (Mawdsley, Savage & King 2014).

In practical terms, it should be possible to assemble a range of data on specific aspects of governance performance and government capacity, using both ‘internal’ scores on bureaucratic systems and controls as well as ‘external’ scores on public perception of the impact of these on people’s everyday lives.

Establishing median scores would support the identification of strategic areas within government where performance is unusually strong, and more refined targets for the allocation of aid to build out on such areas. Our research, for example, identified a cluster of indicators associated with intersectoral and cross-government policy coherence, in which SUN joiners significantly out-performed their non-SUN counterparts. Our conclusion – in particular where the political settlement of conflict can result in a fragmented government with different sectors held by formerly opposing groups – is that allocating aid in ways that foster and extend intersectoral coordination within recipient fragile states may have been particularly effective, regardless of wider instability, in engendering or extending capacity among SUN joiners to generate coherent action on the problem of undernutrition.

There is a danger that the current orientation of donors to fragile and conflict-affected states, as a category, becomes self-fulfilling in individual cases. Assumed weakness in governance drives donors to allocate aid outside government, or only tangentially through it, weakening state capacity and legitimacy and even amplifying intersectoral competition and incoherence. Short-term humanitarian interventions are unsustainable, failing to flow through into long-run improvements in human development conditions on the ground, while bypassed government remains on the sideline. Unimproved governance capacity, weak legitimacy, and patchy and short-run delivery at the level of households and communities feed through into social unrest, political instability and the rising risk of violent challenge for control of the state itself.

Notes

¹ Aid to fragile states constituted over a third of all global aid in 2011 (OECD 2014). While allocations to FCAS from all donors fell by 2.4 per cent between 2010 and 2011, DAC donor allocation to FCAS fell by only 0.7 per cent, while allocation to all developing countries fell by 2.5 per

cent (OECD 2014). On the whole, the picture is one of continuing fiscal commitment to FCAS among a group of major traditional donors even in the context of post-crisis reductions in ODA. See also, e.g. World Bank 2014.

² More recent advances, for example the assessment of fragility along a spectrum marked out by the five Peace and Statebuilding Goals established as part of the New Deal under the g7+ initiative, remain vulnerable to choice of indicators and means of measurement.

³ It is estimated that undernutrition is 50 per cent higher in fragile and conflict-affected states in Africa than in non-FCAS countries (AfDB 2012). Almost 60 per cent of countries at the bottom of the Global Hunger Index are FCAS (IFPRI 2012). Eight of the 14 countries which, together, contain 80 per cent of the world's stunted children are defined as fragile and conflict-affected (Unicef 2013).

⁴ World Bank, OECD and UKHMG/DFID.

⁵ Using a cut-off date of 31 March 2013. We acknowledge that this is somewhat arbitrary (not least since countries, including some FCAS, continue to join or be eligible to join SUN after that date). However, it is reflective of the completion of the first phase of the SUN movement, as documented in the SUN Secretariat's 2012 Update.

⁶ See e.g. Hellman 2013.

⁷ Security sector spending increased by 61 per cent after 2006–07, 86 per cent of that rise from bilateral donors. Aid to 'governance and security' rose 165 per cent between 2002 and 2009, from 6.9 to 12.2 per cent of total spending over the period – totalling USD\$ 16.6 billion in 2009 (Development Initiatives 2012).

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