

# The Ubiquity of State Fragility: Fault Lines in the Categorisation and Conceptualisation of Failed and Fragile States

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## Abstract

In the last three decades, the categories of fragile and failed states have gained significant importance in the fields of law, development, political science and international relations. The wider discourse plays a key role in guiding the policies of international community and multilateral institutions and has also led to the emergence of a plethora of indices and rankings to measure and classify state fragility. A critical and theoretical analysis of these matrices brings to light three crucial aspects that the current study takes as its departure point. First, the formulas and conceptual paradigms show that fragility of states is far more ubiquitous than is generally recognised, and that the so-called successful and stable states are a historical, political and geographical anomaly. Second, in the absence of an agreed definition of a successful state or even that of a failed or fragile state, the indicators generally rely on negative definitions to delineate the failed and fragile state. They generally suggest that their reading is built on a Weberian ideal–typical state, which takes the idea of monopoly over legitimate violence as its starting point. The third and final point suggests that the indicators and rankings, misconstruing the Weberian ideal–typical state, actually end up comparing fragile states against an ideal–mythical state. The article argues that this notional state is not only ahistorical and apolitical, but it also carries the same undertones that have been the hallmark of theories of linear development, colonialism and imperialism.

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**Introduction**

In the last three decades, the categories of failed, fragile or weak states (broadly subsumed within the idea of state fragility) have gained much importance in the fields of law, development, peace and conflict studies, political science and international relations. At the heart of this discourse is a curious link between fragility and violence which inverts our common understanding of these two terms. In common parlance, fragility and violence are considered antithetical – proclamations of fragility (from Latin *fragilis*, in turn from Proto-Indo-European *frangere*: ‘to break’) (Couldrey and Herson, 2013) are reminders about the precariousness of equilibriums, instability of situations, vulnerability of individuals or about the delicate nature of artefacts. Fragility demands that violence be kept at bay, for violence can reduce the stable into fragile and diminish the fragile into non-existent. Assertions of fragility, then, do not invite violence, but are reminders of treading with caution to prevent the breakdown of any (un)stable equilibrium.

In matters of state fragility, however, the discourse assumes the reverse. Here, fragility is taken as foundational to violence and as a problem in its own right which at times may even need to be violently corrected. Fragile states are considered the ‘breeding ground for terrorism’ (Kaplan, 2008: 4), a cause of underdevelopment, and a ‘menace not only to [their] own people, but also to their own neighbours, and indeed the world’ (Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan quoted in Grimm et al., 2014: 200). This *violent fragility*, we are told, is to be treated and rooted out from the legal–political sphere like a ‘degenerative disease’ (Hill, 2005: 148). State fragility is deemed not just a symptom of social/legal/political problems, but as a problem in itself that invites a diverse set of prescriptions. Development practitioners, aid organisations and international donors suggest financial and technological aid, institution building, strengthening of governance infrastructure or reinforcing the civil society as some possible solutions (Gisselquist, 2017); international political actors recommend state-building through incentives and penalties and, if needed in extreme cases, armed intervention and occupation (Krasner, 2004).

There are three key normative ideas and assumptions on which this narrative of state fragility rests. First is the rather obvious notion that the political entity called the state has some responsibilities, the non-fulfilment of which implies that the state has become fragile. While the formal-legal right to sovereignty may remain in many cases, the effective authority, capability of governance and the ability or even the desire to cater to citizens’ demands may be lacking (Thürer, 1999). Linked to this, the second assumption suggests that state fragility, understood as the absence of stability, will lead to complete failure and collapse of the state in question if not addressed effectively and immediately. This could then not only result in (more) violence and underdevelopment for the state’s own citizens, but also threaten international peace and security and the

safety of stable states and the wider international community. Finally, and most significantly, is the idea that fragility of states is an aberration within the wider community of stable and strong states. The failed or the fragile state is taken as a category that goes against the normalcy of state–citizen and state–state relationships; it is considered an anomaly that needs to be realigned with the international legal–political norm (Brooks, 2005). This article calls them normative assumptions because they evoke and construct a certain normative and normalising structure where the fragile or failed state becomes an outlier and a dangerous deviation from the norm.

The more common critiques of this dominant understanding of state fragility tend to focus on the inadequacy of categories (Bøås and Jennings, 2005), the vagueness of the terminologies (Mazarr, 2014), the charges of neo-imperialism and historical determinism (Hill, 2005) or even the problems with measuring and quantification of this phenomenon (Bhuta, 2015; Nay, 2013). These accounts either lead to suggestions of various categorisations and formulations as an alternate to the labels of failed and fragile states (Call, 2010) or even to calls of abandoning the project altogether. However, even within these critical narratives, the normalcy of state stability and success (however defined) and the anomalous nature of state fragility remains a key assumption. It is the underlying truth on which the structures and engagements of the international political community rests, and it is this fundamental notion that the current article challenges. It is argued here that, contrary to the conventional understanding, the fragility of states is not an anomaly, but is a sociopolitical phenomenon that is prevalent and ubiquitous. The normative and normalising assertions that view modern states as inherently strong and stable paint the international community as structured along these lines and cast the so-called fragility as an anomaly. But the evidence for an inverted reading comes from the same set of rankings and indicators that have been established to diagnose, measure, quantify and classify the phenomenon of state fragility.

There are a plethora of indices and categorisations that have emerged in the last decade and a half to examine and classify states on the basis of their relative stability and efficacy – a quantification trend that can also be witnessed in other areas of global governance (Davis et al., 2015). The Fragile States Index (FSI, formerly known as the Failed States Index) produced by The Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine (The Fund for Peace, 2019), the World Bank’s periodic lists of fragile states (World Bank Group, 2019), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) ‘States of Fragility’ Reports (SFRs) (OECD, 2018) and the Index of State Weakness prepared by the Brookings Institution (Brookings Institution, 2008) are some of the most well-known examples among these. These rankings, indices and reports categorise states on the basis of their performances in areas such as protection of religious freedoms, dealing with food scarcity, GDP growth, curtailment of corruption, perceived legitimacy of the state, presence of riots and protests, responses to human rights violations, presence of political freedoms and civil liberties, periodic elections and absence of conflicts and militancy, among many others. The insights offered by this article are based on a detailed analysis of the development and conceptual foundations of these indicators.

While a number of accounts focus on the problems of quantification and measurement within these indicators (Bhuta, 2015; Hehir, 2007; Newman, 2007), a critical and theoretical analysis of these matrices brings to light three crucial aspects that the current

study takes as its departure point. First, the formulas and conceptual paradigms in these indicators show that fragility of states is far more ubiquitous than is generally recognised, and that the so-called successful and stable states are the historical, political and geographical anomaly. Second, in the absence of an agreed definition of a successful state or even that of a failed or fragile state, the indicators generally rely on negative definitions to delineate the failed and fragile state. Their reading is built on a Weberian ideal-typical state, which takes the idea of monopoly over legitimate violence as the starting point, but develops it further to include the responsibilities of a modern state dealing with provision of social goods. The third and final point suggests that the indicators and rankings, misconstruing the Weberian ideal-typical state, actually end up comparing fragile states against an ideal-mythical state. This article argues that this notional state is not only ahistorical and apolitical, but it also carries the same undertones that have been the hallmark of theories of linear development, colonialism and imperialism.

The structure of the article is built around the stepwise development of the three arguments mentioned above. The next section will briefly discuss the persistence and the significance of the fragile states category and will highlight the significance and conceptual ambiguity associated with the concept. The article will then briefly discuss the various indices and rankings that have emerged to measure the fragility or weakness of state, a detailed analysis of which provides the insights mentioned here. By way of quantifying the complex sociolegal phenomena of state fragility and in their attempt to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and policy interventions, these indicators create a certain normative environment in which the binaries of successful-failed or strong-fragile states play out. This will be followed by the critical account of these indicators, focusing on the problems with regard to their attempts at normalisation, lack of context and of the construction of a certain normative ideal. This will then be followed by a conclusion.

## **The Elusiveness of State Fragility**

In the field(s) of law, the state has traditionally been considered a matter of sovereignty and of the right to govern, rather than an issue of efficacy and fragility (Donnelly, 2014). This means that in law, and particularly in international law, the state is generally taken as a binary category pertaining to the legitimate right to rule which is either present or absent (von Engelhardt, 2018), and which generally precludes a discussion on state fragility. This conventional understanding of the juridical idea of state as distinct from any empirical or sociolegal manifestation of it underestimates the implications that the 'fragile state' label has on social, legal and political spheres. While it is not possible here to chart out the many reasons why fragile states should be taken seriously as a legally significant category, this article proceeds on the assumption that state fragility is an increasingly important idea for discourses on law, state and sovereignty for at least two reasons: First, due to the alleged effects that state fragility has on sociopolitical and economic environments of a given state and society; and second, the notional implications of fragility for international legal actors and for the fragile states themselves. This topic is also important because it is inextricably linked with the histories and politics of imperialism and colonialism, which cannot be separated either from international law

(Anghie, 2005) or from the analysis of domestic normative orderings in postcolonial societies themselves (Saeed, 2018).

The importance of delving into the debates on conceptualisations and classifications of failed and fragile states, therefore, stems not just from political and academic interests, but due to the fact that these categories feed into discussions on foreign policy, international humanitarian and criminal law, development assistance, financial aid and international investment. Institutions such as OECD, the World Bank and other donor organisations have been known to take decisions based on these indicators and categorisations of the state, even if they rely on their own data to suggest alternate classifications. In fact, the proposal for the first OECD fragility report expressly mentioned that ‘the donor community is increasingly concerned about the implications for international stability and development progress (in line with the Millennium Development Goals) resulting from state failure or state fragility’ (OECD, 2005: 3). The focus on results is an inevitable outcome of the resource flows in the name of fragility – in 2011, the Overseas Development Aid to states labelled as fragile by OECD was to the tune of US\$53 billion (Gisselquist, 2017). Similarly, in the post-conflict period in Uganda, international donors contributed to around 50–60% of the country’s budget between 1992 and 2005 (Fisher, 2014). At the same time, the labels of fragile or failed state also play a key role in foreign policy decisions to delineate which countries are seen as threats to international peace and security or which countries are to be sanctioned. This was evident, for instance, in the case of air strikes and imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011. While informing the UK parliament about the military action taken by the United Kingdom by virtue of UN Resolution 1973, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom stated that ‘the consequences for Europe of a failed pariah state on its southern border . . . are simply too great to ignore’ (HC Deb 21 March 2011).

Despite its significance and impact, however, the concept of state fragility is notoriously difficult to pin down. While there are questions as to whether the category is used selectively by international community and donors to further their own policy goals (Boås and Jennings, 2007), even at the conceptual level there is a lack of consensus on the definition of this phenomenon. The idea of fragile states started life as the category of failed states that goes back to at least the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the crises on the African continent and the conflict in the Balkans required a different category of analysis by the development and security communities. It was around this time that scholars such as Helman and Ratner (1992) proposed the term ‘failed states’ and Zartman (1995) suggested ‘collapsed states’. The discourse was given a further boost after 9/11, and in 2002 the US National Security Strategy expressly stated that fragility was more dangerous for the interests of the United States than other states (The Fund for Peace, 2006). And, arguably, it fed into the discussions on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that were gaining prominence at the time (although the 2005 World Summit document does not mention failed or fragile states while referring to R2P, the idea that certain states may be unable to fulfil their responsibilities leaving residual responsibility on the international community carries the same logic and tone as the fragile states discourse). Over the last two-and-a-half decades, the move from the label of failed state – which was deemed unhelpful as it conveyed a sense of finality and a binary distinction between successful and failed states – towards

notions of weak states, quasi-states (Jackson, 1998), collapsed states, shadow states and fragile states and finally to 'state fragility' or 'situations of fragility' is largely an attempt at conceptual refinement of the basic idea itself.

Scholars in the field have attempted to resolve this definitional ambiguity in a variety of different ways. Helman and Ratner (1992), who are considered to have used the terminology for the first time, did not define the term as such, but suggested that the 'failed nation state [is] utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community' due to civil strife, political instability and economic difficulties. Numerous commentators have since presented diverging views on demarcating the phenomenon. Focusing on internal conflict, Rotberg suggested that 'failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and contested bitterly by warring factions' (2010: 5). He adds numerous other factors to the identification of the failed state, including the endurance of violence, communal disharmony, lack of control over borders, a predatory character regarding its own citizens, increase in criminal violence, failure to deliver education, health and other political goods, deteriorated institutions and infrastructures, heightened corruption, all of which lead to an erosion of state legitimacy (Rotberg, 2002, 2003). Jackson (1998), on the other hand, focused on the inability of the state to provide basic civil conditions such as peace and physical security in its domestic setting as the primary condition of failure.

Jean-Germain Gros starts with the idea of the state in the 'Weberian sense' to include the notions of 'territory, polity, authority backed by the monopolistic control of the legitimate means of coercion, and recognition at home and abroad' which is then modified into a 'modern state' focusing on 'extractive, protective/regulatory and redistributive' capacities (1996: 456). Gros then suggests a taxonomy of state failure which includes anarchic, phantom/mirage, anaemic, captured and aborted states. There are many other voices that present different ideas and lenses through which the 'typology of collapse' could be understood (Kirschner, 2011: 568), as scholars and organisations such as OECD, World Bank and the Fund for Peace have come up with their own definitions. Brooks, in a similar vein, suggested that

Successful states control defined territories and populations, conduct diplomatic relations with other states, monopolize legitimate violence within their territories, and succeed in providing adequate social goods to their populations. *Failed states, their dark mirror image*, lose control over the means of violence, and cannot create peace or stability for their populations or control their territories. (2005: 1160–1161, emphasis added)

Based on this plethora of conceptualisations, some commentators like Mazarr lament the absence of a consensus on how to delineate the boundaries of the phenomenon (Mazarr, 2014), while others ask for the categories to be dismissed altogether because of their vagueness and instrumentalisation (Hill, 2005). At the same time, there are those, such as Rotberg, who insist that the presence of diverse perspectives should not be taken as the absence of a workable definition and that these accounts – such as his own proposition – serve well to understand the basic premise of the issues. But such notions are unable to account for the wider critique presented against the whole enterprise, which challenges the assumptions that lay at the heart of this discourse.

It is granted that the definitional accounts associated with the terms of state failure or fragility have at least created a variety of lenses that can be used to gauge the relative stability or weakness of a state. But, there are two key aspects to note here. First, in the absence of a conceptual consensus, the states at the lower end of the stability-fragility spectrum are generally defined in contrast to the stable ones – the unsuccessful states emerge from an oppositional understanding of the successful states that are taken as the international legal–political norm (as the ‘dark mirror image’) (Brooks, 2005). This position suggests that there are certain characteristics that are readily apparent in a state authority, and the abdication of state responsibility, the non-provision of public goods, the presence of violence and so on lie outside the confines of so-considered normal state behaviour. It is this *construction of the norm* which is the key problem and which is common to both the conceptual definitions and the indices. Second, while outlining a negative definition and in the absence of a consensus on what a state actually is let alone a successful one, most of these definitional accounts admittedly take the Weberian ideal–typical state as their starting point. This construction, it is argued here, misconstrues Weber’s own methodology and it serves only to reinforce the norm constructed by the definitional accounts. The idealised and mythical state that is taken as the criterion to judge, aid and reprimand fragile states is an ahistorical and apolitical entity that reeks of linear modernisation and colonialism. And, as will be discussed in the following sections, the tools that are geared towards measurement, ranking and classification of failed and fragile states fare no better against these critiques.

## **Fragile State Indicators and Rankings: ‘If You Cannot Measure It, You Cannot Improve It’**

Furthering the global trend of ‘governance at a distance’ through quantification and indicators (Broome and Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2015), a number of indices and matrices cropped up in the last decade and a half to measure state fragility and potential failure. Brinkerhoff (2014) takes an optimistic view and suggests that these indicators and measurements have emerged to ‘tame the wickedness of the state fragility/failure problem set’ by bringing clarity in place of ambiguity, and adding transparency, consistency, ease of decision-making and policy harmonisation. That may well be true, but the problems noted above are more pronounced in these indices and rankings, despite their attempt at simplifying and quantifying the essentially vague concept. The information, insights and critique offered later in this article have emerged from an in-depth engagement with these rankings and indices. But before moving further in terms of discussing the indicators, it is necessary to provide a short overview of these matrices for those who may be unfamiliar with the field.

### ***Fragile States Index***

The ‘Fragile States Index’, previously known as the Failed States Index until 2013, is published by the Fund for Peace (and by *Foreign Policy* magazine until 2014) and is perhaps the most well-recognised state fragility ranking. It started off in 2005 (The Fund for Peace, 2005) with a benchmark of 60 states scored against a list of 12 social, political,

economic and military indicators, further subdivided into measurements on demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced persons, group grievances, human flight and brain drain (social indicators); uneven economic development, poverty and economic decline (economic indicators); state legitimacy, public service, human rights and rule of law, security apparatus, factionalised elites and external intervention (political and military indicators). The countries are allocated a score out of 10 against each of these indicators based on an analysis of media reports, and the scores are then averaged out to give an overall score which determines the rank of the country within the overall scheme. The list of countries has grown to 178 since then, which are categorised from 'very sustainable' as the least fragile to the 'very alarming' as the most fragile states (The Fund for Peace, 2019).

The first FSI made express references to the US National Security Strategy and suggested that failed states threaten the 'world's equilibrium' (The Fund for Peace, 2005: 56–57). The 2005 Index took the Weberian understanding of the state's 'monopoly on the legitimate use of force' as the most important attribute of a failed state, although it also included other associated factors (The Fund for Peace, 2005: 58). It initially defined a failed or failing state as 'one in which the government does not have effective control of its territory, is not perceived as legitimate by a significant portion of its population, does not provide domestic security or basic public services to its citizens, and lacks a monopoly on the use of force' (The Fund for Peace, 2006: 52). The recent turn towards fragility rather than state failure was an acknowledgement on the part of the Index that the emphasis had shifted away from 'who is the world's most failed state?' to 'trends and rate-of-change' and performance over time (The Fund for Peace, 2019: 12). This gradual change was also visible in the move away from US security interests and foreign policy to issues around transparency, global economy, aid effectiveness, governance infrastructure, economic stability and so on over the years.

The FSI conceptualises the fragile state negatively, as a state that fails to have effective control over its territory, that may not be perceived as legitimate by a significant proportion of its population, which does not provide domestic security or basic services to its citizens, or which lacks a monopoly on the use of force (The Fund for Peace, 2019: 31–41). This negative definition is mirrored by other indices and the wider discourse on fragility, the significance of which will be discussed later in the paper.

### *OECD 'States of Fragility Report'*

The OECD initiated a proposal in 2005 with the first report on 'Monitoring Resource Flows to Fragile States' in 2006 under the remit of its Fragile States Group. It analysed a list of 35 states taken from the bottom 40% of the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutions Assessment (CPIA) list of 2003. As the name suggests, the initial push behind this exercise was to gauge the volatility, exclusionary effects and efficacy of aid flows into fragile situations (OECD, 2006) primarily linked to the Official Development Assistance from OECD countries. With volatility of aid taken both as a symptom of fragility as well as a contributing factor, the report acknowledged that fragile states on the whole were under-aided compared to their need. But while the OECD report is used by a number of donor organisations and countries and still monitors resource flows into



fragile states (including development aid, foreign direct investment, trade surplus, etc.), the ambit of the report and the conceptualisation of fragility have become vastly expanded over the years.

The initial years saw the OECD borrow the category of fragile states from the World Bank as a given, and stated that this category included countries ‘falling into the two bottom CPIA quintiles ... [while] the group of highly fragile states is defined as countries falling into the bottom CPIA quintile’ (OECD, 2007a: 27). In the following years, the report expanded its data to include the indicators and rankings produced by the Brookings Institution (Brookings Institution, 2008) and Carleton University (Carment and Samy, 2012) and started expanding its concept of fragility to include, for instance, institutional capacity (OECD, 2008). It also began to adopt political and developmental tones – for instance, a report issued in 2009 was titled ‘Ensuring Fragile States Are Not Left Behind’ (OECD, 2009) – but also by beginning to rank the states according to their dependence on aid and foreign direct investment (OECD, 2010). The 2010 report also mentioned for the first time, borrowing from a different report (OECD, 2007b), the OECD’s own definition of a fragile state as one where ‘government and state structures lack capacity – or in some cases, political will – to deliver public safety and security, good governance and poverty reduction to their citizens’ (OECD, 2010: 20).

From 2014 onwards, the social and development aspects, the logic of ranking and the linkages with other indicators (such as FSI) have seen an upward trend. The OECD reports have increasingly been concerned about the inability of fragile states to meet the Millennium Development Goals (OECD, 2013), the declining aid to developing countries and the states’ performance against indicators focusing on violence, access to justice, accountability and social inclusion (OECD, 2015). The moral grammar – focusing on the problems faced and posed by the citizens of fragile states – has also strengthened over the years. The most important shift in the OECD categorisation is perhaps the adoption of the so-termed ‘Multidimensional Fragility Framework’ which measured and classified close to 60 countries according to the risks and the states’ coping mechanisms along five dimensions – economic foundations, environmental and health risks, political processes, overall security and violence, and societal cohesion (OECD, 2016). These categories are further subdivided into 52 indicators to measure the states or contexts of fragility. A significant aspect for the purposes of this article is the indicator focusing on security which includes the Weberian idea of monopoly over legitimate violence (OECD, 2016: 156–157). Also important is the notion of the ‘state of fragility’ which adopts a holistic approach to look at the fragile situation afflicting the whole society and region in which the state, as just one of the many actors, has ‘weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society’ (OECD, 2018).

### *World Bank’s ‘Harmonized List of Fragile Situations’*

The World Bank Group’s Fragile, Conflict and Violence Group (formally the Center on Conflict, Security and Development) annually releases its very brief classification of fragile situations and economies. Its significance comes from the fact that the list has previously fed into FSI and OECD reports, and continues to guide the policies of the

World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the African Development Bank, along with other organisations. World Bank's first list was compiled in the 2006 fiscal year as the Low Income Countries Under Stress List (2006–2009) and the concept and the list have evolved to the now titled Harmonized List of Fragile Situations (World Bank Group, 2019) as the World Bank's own understanding of the development challenges in countries affected by violence and instability has developed over the years (Piffaretti et al., 2014). While the methodology and the workings of the indicators remain hidden, the classification suggests that the 'harmonization comes from averaging the World Bank Group's CPIA [Country Policy and Institutional Assessment] scores with those of relevant regional development banks' ratings to arrive at a harmonized rating of 3.2 or lower (World Bank Group, 2019).

### *Other Indices and Rankings*

There are also a number of other active and inactive indices and rankings that emerged alongside those mentioned above roughly around the same time. The Brookings Institution issued a report titled 'Index of State Weakness in the Developing World' in 2008 which has been regularly used by other indices. It mapped 141 countries against four 'baskets', each with five indicators: Economic, Political, Security and Social Welfare. The report defined weak states as 'countries that lack the essential capacity and/or will to fulfill four sets of critical government responsibilities: fostering an environment conducive to sustainable and equitable economic growth; establishing and maintaining legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions; securing their populations from violent conflict and controlling their territory; and meeting the basic human needs of their Population' (Brookings Institution, 2008: 3).

In addition, Carleton University has issued 'Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP)' reports every 2 years since 2006 to guide Canadian development assistance (Carmen et al., 2017). This report measures and ranks countries against six categories: Governance, Economics, Security and Crime, Human Development, Demography, Environment. The Department for International Development (DFID) also issued its Fragile States and Regions List until 2016. It understands fragile states and regions as those that 'suffer external and social stresses that are particularly likely to result in violence [and] lack the capacity to manage conflict without violence' (DFID, 2016). While the report is geared towards helping DFID in allocation of resources, the methodology behind the list is not too clear.

### **Fault Lines in the Categorisation and Conceptualisation of State Fragility**

One of the most interesting facets of these indicators is that almost all of them emerged in or just after 2005. While this is something that clearly requires more empirical and archival investigation, there are a number of factors that may explain this occurrence. First, the national security narrative gradually gained ascendancy in the post-9/11 era and resulted in international and unilateral conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The crisis of legitimacy after the Iraq War may have also been a contributing factor. Second, linked to the security narrative, was the emergence of the R2P doctrine which, incidentally, was

accepted as part of the UN General Assembly Resolution passed at the 2005 World Summit. The World Summit document, while not expressly alluding to failed states, mentions the problems that are generally attributed to state failure or fragility. Third, the development actors required clearer ideas on where the funds were being channelled and what was being done with them. In fact, the OECD proposal document expressly mentions the 'donors' concerns' that led to the first report (OECD, 2005). The emergence of these indices all roughly around the same time cannot be a mere coincidence, and security interests, foreign policy concerns and donor funding may hold the key to understand the initial push behind them. But there are many significant conceptual questions that the indicators and the whole discourse on state fragility raise. For instance, from whose vantage point is the failure or fragility of the state gauged remains an unanswered question. This is because not all citizens groups and stakeholders may be equally disadvantaged by virtue of state fragility (Bøås and Jennings, 2005).

Similarly, there are two common critiques of these indicators which, although not the central concern of this article, nonetheless deserve to be mentioned as they feed into the arguments presented here. One is the general problem with quantification and calculability of complex social phenomena which is linked with the general neoliberal obsession with measurement. Critiquing this 'measurement revolution' in areas of rule of law and access to justice, Paliwala and Kamchedzera (2013) term this 'justice indicatorology' which is unable to transcend the issues of selection bias, the validity of data and often results in no real positive effect on the dynamics of development-related and rule of law interventions. Merry and others have shown how global governance indicators on the whole have emerged as a technology of global and technocratic governance, where international community and multilateral organisations create a normative environment which inevitably shapes the conduct of states (Broome and Quirk, 2015; Merry et al., 2015). The rewards (aid, development finance, investment, etc.) and punishments (reputational damage, sanctions and even armed intervention) compel states into adopting the positions required by the indices and rankings, for better or for worse, even if it may not always result in real change on ground. In this sense, indicators and rankings are both performative and normative (Nelken, 2015: 319) – they perform their role as instruments of governance, and create a normative and normalising environment by setting expectations and end-goals.

Indicators, then, essentially set standards and are 'placeholders' for ideological and normative values (Davis et al., 2015). And even more significantly, through the creation of this normative setting, the indices and rankings sometimes replace the object to become *the* target of state's economic and political activities and encourage (or compel) some countries to even try and play the system to their advantage. Fisher highlights, for instance, how Uganda maintains a contradictory stance when it comes to state fragility. While it portrays itself as a strong state to boost investor confidence by maintaining political stability and strong economic growth, Uganda also has an ambivalence with regard to solving the crises in conflict-prone regions so that it can attract more financial and international assistance as a fragile state (Fisher, 2014). Heiduk (2014) suggests a similar gaming of the state fragility system by the military powers in Indonesia, who used the threat of 'Balkanisation of Indonesia' as the tool to strengthen their hold over the political regime.

The other common critique of the indicators and rankings focuses on the problems of quantification, and to their claims of objectivity and neutrality. Commentators suggest

that in order to quantify and classify, those who compile such indicators and rankings box complex sociolegal phenomena into neat categories, which are unable to account for the various interlinkages that underlie these categories. The selection of these categories is not free from subjective decision-making, whether in terms of defining or choosing labels or assigning a score to the entities it chooses to classify. Through a detailed study of the development of state fragility indicators by the World Bank and OECD, Oliver Nay highlights that despite carrying normative and objective undertones, the development of OECD and World Bank indicators show that the assumption of political and ideological neutrality at the core of this enterprise is unfounded (Nay, 2013). At the same time, there are certain social phenomena that escape all efforts aimed at quantification and measurement. State fragility indicators are unable to escape this challenge and critique. For instance, Nehal Bhuta (2015) highlights how the FSI and its data validation techniques are essentially subjective and non-transparent, which often produce results which can be considered both statistically invalid and scientifically non-replicable.

This article argues that there are three even more fundamental problems with this whole state fragility measuring enterprise which not only critiques the classification exercise, but also suggests that this may actually be harmful for the very same countries which are supposed to improve by virtue of this labelling. These are termed here as the problems of normalisation, of acontextuality and of mythologisation of the ideal state. Each of these problems will be discussed below in turn.

### *State Fragility and (A)normalisation*

Despite using different formulations and measurement criteria, the state fragility indicators are quite similar in their underlying approach. While their emphasis differs on governance, development, socio-economic stability, equality, openness of the society, on perceptions of transparency or on the numerous ways to calculate these, there is one stark conceptual similarity – the category of fragile state is negatively defined. The definitional accounts in the scholarly literature, as well as the conceptual models offered by the indices and rankings, take the state – and even more so *a successful or stable state* – as the starting point against which the fragile states are then defined. The quantification exercise is premised on the notion that attributes certain duties to the state and suggests that successful states are largely able to fulfil these obligations while the fragile and failed states are unable or unwilling to do the same.

More importantly, these indicators not only use the successful or stable state as a benchmark to judge the struggling or weaker states but that, in doing so, they construct a normative image of the international legal and political arena. This image suggests that the international arena largely consists of successful and stable (and normal) states, and paints the fragile or failed state as the anomaly. A weak state, in this light, is an occurrence that endangers international peace and security, that needs to be rooted out as a ‘degenerative disease’. The anomalous weak state, then, needs to be strengthened in order to become a functioning member of the international community. The norm presented by this image, however, does not stand up to scrutiny when the indices and rankings are closely examined. On the contrary, the indices and rankings, by virtue of

their own matrices and measurements, highlight that state fragility is a far more ubiquitous and prevalent phenomenon than is recognised.

The 2015 FSI that graded countries on the basis of a variety of military, economic and political indicators, for instance, paints the most interesting picture of this scenario. Out of the 178 countries included in the report, only 53 (29.77%) were considered to be in the range between very sustainable and stable. In fact, the index labelled Finland as the only country in the world that was considered 'very sustainable' (The Fund for Peace, 2015). On the other side of the spectrum, 60% of the countries (107 out of 178) were considered to have a noticeable degree of state fragility and fell within the warning and alarming categories. The 2019 Index fares a little bit better, as it included seven countries in the range of 'very sustainable' states. However, the percentage of alarming, very alarming and problematic states still outweighs the supposedly sustainable and stable states by a margin, with only 33.14% countries classed as stable/sustainable (The Fund for Peace, 2019). The Brookings Institution's Index of State Weakness in the Developing World (2008) presented the same outlook. It put forth a classification of 141 developing countries of the world and highlighted that even the most stable among these (Slovak Republic) had less than desirable scores with regard to inflation and socio-economic rights. The OECD and World Bank reports further highlight this trend. The OECD fragility report, which has evolved over the years, accepted in the 2016 report that 75 different countries of the world had been included in the most fragile category at one time or another in the last decade (OECD, 2018). While not the majority, 75 countries out of 178 can hardly be labelled as an anomaly.

Examining the indicators as the very tool to measure state fragility and weakness shows that state fragility and weakness is present everywhere. What these indicators should emphasise, but do not do so explicitly, is the fact that state fragility is not an anomaly – and by some accounts it is the notional stability of states that is the exception rather than the norm. This is why the article employs the idea of the ubiquity of state fragility. Brooks argues that 'Weak, failing, and failed states are not the exception in many parts of the world . . . [but] the norm, and have been since their inception' (2005: 1174). We can take this even further and argue that it is not that the fragile state has been the norm in 'some parts of the world', but that the successful and strong state is a modern exception that is only present in some parts of the world at precise moments in time.

Not only is state fragility prevalent, but it is also present across various continents, while the so-called stable states are geographically and contextually (and temporally) concentrated. The geographical limitation is obvious from the fact that most of the so-called successful and stable countries are located in particularly the northern hemisphere, and particularly in Europe. Out of the seven countries currently listed as stable in the FSI, three are Scandinavian countries, two in Western Europe, while the other two are former European settler colonies (Canada and Australia) (The Fund for Peace, 2009). That this says something about the model of the successful state is one part of the problem. But even if the model and the formulation is analysed on its own terms, it shows that while stable countries are concentrated primarily in one part of the world, the fragile and stable countries are present in every continent and represent every part of the globe. The stable countries are also similar in terms of their history and politics. These are not postcolonial countries in the traditional sense of the term, they have not generally had military regimes

or international invasions recently, they were largely not the primary targets of neocolonial economic experiments, or they enjoyed relative isolation when it comes to international law and politics. The fragile states, on the other hand, include countries with diverse histories and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. That most of them are postcolonial countries that have also been part of neocolonial economic experiments makes for more than a mere coincidence, as the DR Congo example below shows.

The question that may arise here is that we may be reading too much into the state fragility indicators to base the claim that state fragility is ubiquitous. There are two responses to this: One that the analysis uses these indicators precisely because they are hailed as *the* tools to measure, classify and diagnose state fragility and prescribe paths towards stability and it is therefore important to critically analyse them; and second, that the critique of these indicators reaches out beyond them to show that this problem afflicts the wider discourse as well. As indicated previously, the main critique being offered here is that the indicators construct a particular norm on the basis of which the fragile states are expected to follow the standards set by the international community. What this article suggests is that the international community and the standards it sets are primarily an illusion based on partly the historical dynamics of dominance and partly on the conceptual hegemony of certain quantification and definitional models. This issue is further complemented by the absence of the wider sociolegal, historical and political contexts of the countries, which brings us to the next point.

### *The Acontextual Nature of the Indicators*

Another key problem, which feeds into creating an abnormal normality, is that these indicators are almost always ahistorical and apolitical. The indicators highlight a number of problems that affect the fragility and stability of states, but generally do not go into the details of the various trajectories that have brought these countries to the positions that they currently occupy in these classifications. Take for instance the case of Belgium and DR Congo which are generally placed at the opposite ends of the indicators and rankings. While Belgium is generally regarded as a 'sustainable state' (The Fund for Peace, 2019), DR Congo has gained notoriety for the protracted conflicts that have been raging in the country over the last few decades, because of which it is deemed as one of the more fragile states around.

However, what the indicators do not discuss adequately is the role that both Belgium and DR Congo have played in their mutual and respective historical trajectories. It is generally acknowledged that Belgian occupation of Congo was one of the most gruesome episodes of colonialism, even by colonial standards (Hochschild, 1999). The horrific violations of the rights and freedoms of individuals are commonly documented. What is less known is the fact that at the time of independence, DR Congo had around 30 people in the whole country who were university graduates and only 3 individuals who had any experience of working in senior civil service roles in the population of 20 million (Brock et al., 2012: 30–31). The ravages and impoverishment of colonial occupation meant that political independence was never going to result in the structural changes that were expected of the state.

At the same time, as dependency theorists have suggested, development and colonialism are a two-way relationship. The resources drained from DR Congo made their way

to Belgium and enabled the state to reach the position that it currently occupies. For instance, by 1959, DR Congo held a 70% share of the total production of industrial diamonds in the world, and a 50% share of the global production of cobalt, the economic benefits of which were directly geared towards supporting the Belgian colonial administration and bolstering the Belgian economy (Brock et al., 2012: 30). The case of many other colonial and colonised countries reflects the same realities. Branwen Jones (2008), for instance, shows in detail how rapacious colonial appropriation, accentuation of communal divides, and the post-independence capitalist exploitation laid the foundation of the unrest and fragility that has plagued Somalia since 1991. Despite this, however, the FSI or OECD reports, in their almost 13 years of publication, do not acknowledge the historical role and the continuous structural problems of colonialism even once within their documents.

States can only be judged by the same measures if and only if the measures are constructed to ignore the historical, political and socio-economic trajectories that each of these countries has taken to reach the point that it currently inhabits. When the majority of the states lie on the 'alarming' end of state fragility spectrum, the norm cannot pose successful states against the unsuccessful ones as a binary; rather, the role and formulation of the state in all these contexts needs to be approached in a different and context-specific light. This highlights the need for a theoretical and empirical examination of state sovereignty, its nature, its formation and its role in the postcolonial and southern contexts, on their own terms (Brooks, 2005; Eriksen, 2011). While the indicators claim to undertake historical and political factors into account, they are only really interested in providing a snapshot of where the states are and how they can supposedly improve their respective futures. They suggest solutions such as end to civil strife, a strengthening of institutional frameworks or increasing citizens' trust on the state. However, there is no acknowledgement by these indices of the structural or long-term (or 'real') historical and political reasons that led to the destruction of these societies in the first place. Without an acknowledgement of these matters, the suggestions by the indicators are bound to seem imperialistic and hypocritical.

It is because of this reason that various commentators argue that the labels should be completely discarded. Hill (2005), for instance, suggests that the colonial history at the heart of the fragile state indicators needs to be acknowledged and the taxonomies should be disbanded altogether. The argument further suggests that the assertion of a model state sounds too similar to linear development and modernisation ideas and reeks of (neo)colonialism. However, this article suggests that while this is partially true, the problem at the heart of the comparisons with the model state is more complex. The absence of historical and political experiences of individual states, and especially the dismissal of their colonial and imperial histories, means that 'reproduction and entrenchment of imperial structures and interventions is legitimized and normalized' (Jones, 2008: 184). It is argued here that this works in two ways – by ignoring the role of the successful/stable states in laying down the course of fragility for the fragile states, but also by then placing the same ideals on the pedestal that laid the foundation for instability in most of the world.

### *The 'Ideal–Mythical' Successful State*

The indicators and the definitional accounts do not hide the fact that they are acontextual and apolitical. At the same time, however, they do not acknowledge the claim that their matrices compare states to a Western European or Anglo-American model of statehood as claimed by critical commentators (Hill, 2005). On the contrary, they (implicitly or explicitly) suggest that the comparison is conducted against a notional successful state, and Western European states are coincidentally ahead of the curve. But where does this model come from? Even if the fragile state is considered the 'dark mirror image' of a stable/successful state, there is no consensus on what a stable state is, what the duties of a state are or even on what a state actually is. But it is repeatedly acknowledged within the literature that the indices, and the scholarly accounts, take the Weberian idea of state as their starting point. For instance, earlier versions of the FSI (2005, 2006) adopted Weber's idea of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force as their most important benchmark to explain state failure. Similar notions have been repeated by other indices within their formulations.

However, it is important to note that there is a difference between what can be considered the Weberian understanding of state and the Weberian ideal–typical model of statehood. The Weberian understanding of state – with the idea of monopoly over the legitimate use of force as its most recognised facet – is present within various accounts and in fact forms one of the core indicators for FSI. Some accounts go further and build on this to include service delivery and provision of social goods as the defining feature of the modern state. This brings us back to the problem of definitional ambiguity and conceptual complexity which, while certainly important, is not the most significant aspect here. What is more important is the morphing of the Weberian ideal–typical model of state present within these accounts. It is suggested here that the indices and practitioners, rather than taking the ideal–typical state as a methodological category, have rather used it as a model for an 'ideal' state which creates a conceptual and political incongruity.

Weber's account of the state spread throughout his work is largely fragmentary and he does not offer a holistic definition of the state in any of his writings (Anter, 2014). That this fragmentary account emerged from his understanding of the history (or histories) of statehood in Europe is an additional caveat. The most significant issue to dwell on, however, is that Weber's sociological and historical methodology accepted that human societies and the associated legal–political entities are inherently complex phenomena, the analysis of which is not only difficult but also relies heavily on the observer's world view which leads to different selections of what constitutes as socially significant questions (Weber, 1949). His understanding of the ideal–type, and more importantly the ideal–typical state for present purposes, is a way of cutting across the layers of social phenomena by taking a single category as the main tool of observation and analysis.

The 'ideal–type' concept itself is not about constructing an 'ideal' but about creating an idea by accentuating certain attributes 'typical' of a certain scenario. It is therefore a means to momentarily fix the complex and ever-transient social phenomena, long enough for the observer to understand how that category can be understood within its wider context (Weber, 1949). Hekman suggests a useful three-step process to understand



the methodological aspect of the Weberian ideal-type. The first step revolves around the determination of the historical or sociological category to provide a pivot for the analysis of the social phenomena (e.g. the state). The second step requires the historian or the sociologist to limit the category with regard to a 'particular time period and, usually, a particular society' (Hekman, 1982: 124). This requires the inclusion of certain historical, political and contextual data rather than a complete dismissal of it. And the final step involves accentuating particular typical elements of the selected category and contexts to observe their interplay. Hekman argues that the Weberian sociological and historical ideal-types may differ in terms of selection of facts, but nonetheless share the same epistemological foundation (1982: 126). So while the ideal-type methodology does end up creating an entity that has not actually existed anywhere in reality, it does not mean that its links with history, politics and social contexts are divested, and nor does it intend to create a utopian or ideal version of this entity. This is where the indicators and the measurements as well as the definitional accounts make a crucial mistake

The approach is reflected in Weber's own work as well. In the 'Objectivity in social science and social policy', where he develops the idea of the ideal-type with clarity (Weber, 1949), he writes that while the ideal-type is not 'true' reality, it nonetheless emerges from the empirical observation of the world and in this sense, it is closer to an empirical reality than an idealised version of reality (Collins, 1986). It is aimed at developing the observer's 'skill in interpretation in research', and does not offer its own hypothesis (Weber, 1949: 47). It is therefore an 'ideal limiting concept' that limits, categorises and classifies the typical. In Weber's own words,

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified thought construct. (1949: 48)

The indices and rankings, however, seem to transform the 'ideal-typical' state into what the article calls an 'ideal-mythical' state – it is an idealised version of state that is mythical in the sense of not being an actually existing entity but also by being a self-referential and self-justifying category. The mythical here does not refer merely to the imaginary, but also presents a coherent organising category in its own right. While both ideal and mythical tend to indicate a move towards the fantastical, the utopian and the imaginary, myth goes further than the ideal in terms of creating, sustaining and furthering itself. Fitzpatrick notes that the 'myth is creative not just in providing an origin but in being a sustained creative force extending itself' (1992: 42). While incorporating the ideal within it, the mythical also hides the contradictions and ambiguities, the inconsistencies and the paradoxes in an apparent unity without ever directly addressing or revealing them (Fitzpatrick, 1992: xii). Significantly, as the limiting concept, the myth not only captures what is included in certain conceptual models along with their contradictions, but also captures its own origins as well as the horizons of all that could be otherwise (Fitzpatrick, 1992: 24).

It is for this reason that the article suggests that the model of state used by the state fragility indicators is not only idealised, but moves from the 'ideal-typical' to the 'ideal-

mythical' notion of a successful/stable state. When the successful state is constructed as a myth, it tends to hide all the contradictions and ambiguities present in the concept, and merely serves to point towards the outliers – the fragile states. It sees the anomaly as the norm, and the norm as a dangerous aberration. An even more significant problem is the construction of the norm in a way that not only hides the prevalence and ubiquity of state fragility, but also hides the historical and continuous role of state success/stability in the creation of fragility elsewhere. That the 'ideal-mythical' state tends to be similar to modern Western experiments with statehood is evident. What is less evident is that once this state is held as a role model for benchmarking, ranking and measuring all the states in the world, it simultaneously erases the states' origins and trajectories as well as the origins and basis of the indices and formulations themselves. And in doing so, it is able to paint itself as neutral, objective, impartial, scholarly and helpful.

This reinvention of itself as a neutral measurement, it is suggested here, is a double injustice for the majority of so-called fragile states especially the postcolonial states. First, as discussed previously, the definitional accounts and the indices ignore and hide the many injustices committed against the states through the colonial and neocolonial enterprise; and second, the model against which their progress is judged compels them to become more like the countries that either benefited from colonialism, or benefited from the political-economies structured through colonialism and imperialism. This is a more nuanced challenge presented against state fragility discourse on the whole, and goes beyond the claim that fragile states are measured against European states, which is easily denied by the indices and ranking organisations. But reversing the categories offered by these indices tells us what they present as their model of a successful/stable (non-fragile) state is: It is a state that is not a colonised state or if it is one, it tends to be a settler colonial state where the indigenous population was subdued and marginalised; it is not a state of what is called the Global South; it is not an African state; and it is not an Asian state. It is an ahistorical, apolitical, acontextual state that should at best be seen as a historical contingency at this particular juncture of humanity's existence in the Western (generally European) hemisphere of the planet.

## **Concluding remarks**

This article is based on an in-depth engagement with the conceptual accounts present within the indices and matrices of state fragility. It has suggested that the indicators and rankings, in their attempt to apply a number to a state, divest the states from their historical, social and political contexts. They rely on an idea of state that is not only ideal but also mythical, in that it hides the ambiguities and contradictions that afflict the discourse, and carries the same undertones that guided development theories and propositions of historical determinism of the past decades. In doing so, the indices invert the norm – they hide the prevalence of so-called state fragility and paint it as a dangerous anomaly that threatens the stability and success of other actors within the international community. This article has suggested that this inversion of the norm and the acontextuality of the indices is unjust on two accounts: It downplays the role of stability in the creation of fragility in the world, but also because it compels the fragile states to follow the paths that they cannot and perhaps even should not adhere to.

There are various different implications of the argument presented here. One implication is that we need to recognise that the category of state (and especially successful state) is itself contested and contingent, which should be reconsidered as an entity that cannot be universally invoked and applied. This may lead towards a discussion on democratic, decentralised non-state alternatives (Brooks, 2005). In this vein, some commentators refer to 'hybrid political orders' and call for a move away from any value judgments of the developing, postcolonial, transitional or failed and fragile states (Boege et al., 2009). The task here is to provincialise the strong, stable and successful state (or the modern Western state) rather than just the fragile and the failed state. The other implication is to gauge, understand and critique the role of the matrices and indices in global governance. The indices, once instituted, assume an autonomous role that often come to dominate the discourse and replace the initial object into becoming the centres of attraction and governance in their own right. At the same time, the indices remain vague, generally non-transparent and become instruments of furthering the policy agendas of whichever organisation(s) or state(s) they represent.

As a final invitation, the article would suggest that rather than looking at the so-called fragile states and why they are in the position that they currently occupy, the scholarly exercise should equally be devoted to how and why the successful states have achieved their respective positions. As stated previously, the non-recognition of historical pillaging of resources and gruesome violation of rights in the colonies is merely another form of the continuation of the same injustice. It is important therefore to look at the states within their 'historically specific social forms and conditions, and their global relations' rather than paint a one-size-fits-all idea of a successful state (Jones, 2008: 182). This may call for many different versions of 'ideal-typical states' including the colonised state, the colonising state, the imperialist state, the state making transition from conflict, the impoverished state, the historically and geographically isolated state, the debt-ridden state pillaged by internal and external actors, the state foreseeing its end due to climate change and so on. Eriksen (2011) presents a postcolonial ideal-type in this vein, but it has to be balanced against a colonial 'ideal-type' state that benefited from this underdevelopment. What is required, then, is weeding out of false promises based on incorrect readings of states' trajectories which will only prove elusive and at worst be harmful for the so-called fragile states and the wider international community in the long run.

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