**The OECD Fragility Clusters are, well, Fragile**

The OECD made an important decision recently to disaggregate their annual “fragile” designation for countries into five constituent dimensions of fragility along Violence, Justice, Institutions, Economic Foundations, and long term Resilience. On the one hand, it [shows](http://www.ua.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2015/03/27/undp-welcomes-new-oecd-report-on-fragility-.html) [conceptual](http://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/article/oecd-report-on-states-of-fragility-echoes-findings-of-afdb-high-level-panel-report-14145/) [progress](http://www.usip.org/events/states-of-fragility-post-2015-ambitions) toward an understanding of what exactly fragility means and therefore what states and the international community should focus on. Now countries like Benin and Cambodia are seen as having very vulnerabilities requiring different international responses. On the other hand, its presentation and execution reveals that there is still a lack methodological understanding of how to conceptualize and measure fragility. Despite a lengthy good faith effort to understand and reproduce their results, I’ve found their methodology opaque and far short of standards of reproducibility in the social sciences.

The easiest way to grasp the problem is to stare at the main product of the report, a five-dimensional Venn diagram that I’ve started to call the pentagram of fragility. For each of the five dimensions, the OECD created an index by taking the average of three inputs that are normalized to a scale of 0 to 100. So the Violence dimension is calculated by taking the average of a country’s scores on battle deaths, interpersonal injuries, and political instability. The 50 countries with the lowest averages are considered vulnerable in that cluster. The report and its Venn diagram focus on those countries that are vulnerable in more than one cluster.

Do the clusters make sense? Take Afghanistan as an example, which is listed as vulnerable in every cluster except Institutions. How is that possibly? Afghanistan regularly ranks very low on corruption issues. General Allen identified corruption as “the existential threat to the long term viability of modern Afghanistan.” How then in the Institution calculation did Afghanistan avoid the bottom 50?

My replication along with the datasets and R script I used are available on Github for anyone to replicate and engage with [LINK].

First, the methodology is vague in several places such as how to handle missing data or whether to include territories and small island states. The report it used data from “2012 or most recent year” which could mean closest to 2012 without going over – standard Price-is-Right rules - but could allow for 2013 data when available. In each case I tried every interpretation with similar results

Second, the underlying data and codebook are not released with the report. I pushed on, gathering, cleaning, and merging the datasets that the OECD used and then calculating the indices using the report’s methodology. During my replication I almost gave up a few times, such as when I realized I would have to code [health-care capabilities from a map](http://www.dni.gov/files/), a depressing backwards paint-by-number.

These errors are not minor; some rankings make small hops across the fragility threshold, but other changes are relatively huge. North Korea, which has been on the one-dimensional Fragile State Index every year since 2008 but does not appear on the OECD’s Venn diagram, is ranked as the worst country for Institutions and Resilience in my replication. North Korea is missing some data, but the Philippines is missing no data and similarly did not make the OECD diagram. It ranks 19th from last in Violence and 15th from last for Resilience. On the other end of the spectrum, I drop Lesotho from the diagram as it ranks as 124th from the bottom for Violence, far from the bottom 50 cutoff.

Of course, just the fact that something is wrong doesn’t make it worth correcting. Such a motto starts a slippery slope to useless arguments in [the internet’s comments sections](https://xkcd.com/386/) [JOKE]. In terms of policy relevance, identifying the different types of needs seems less important given the striking [lack of evidence that foreign aid disbursement is based on need](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/enhanced/doi/10.1111/isqu.12191/).

On the other hand, the OECD report is good at starting discussions on [conceptualizing fragility](http://www.fragilestates.org/2015/04/17/what-the-oecd-still-does-not-understand-about-fragile-states/) and on [policy recommendations](http://securelivelihoods.org/blogpost/78/The-new-OECD-States-of-Fragility-report-exciting-analysis-let-down-by-bland-policy-prescriptions), which could have some influence on the original target, the Sustainable Development Goals, which matter [at least to Jeffrey Sachs](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sustainable-development-goals-shift-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2015-03). At some point, the discussions have to reference real countries and real conditions, at which point it has to matter that we are using the real facts.

In addition, the issues highlighted here should also serve as a call to arms for some changes in the policy community of agencies, IGOs, and NGOs. Just as the [Reinhart-Rogoff replication scandal](https://politicalsciencereplication.wordpress.com/2013/04/19/what-reinhart-rogoff-means-for-the-replication-debate/) reinvigorated the discussion of best practices in political science, the policy community needs to get serious about creating norms of best practice for sharing data and methods from policy reports. Failure to do so is akin to saying we have no interest in being credible or having people engage with us.

Leftovers

with this year’s [States of Fragility](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/states-of-fragility-2015_9789264227699-en) report