Fragile states from the perspective of rural communities

Fragile states, posing a major challenge of our times, are increasingly becoming a focus of attention in international politics and development cooperation. But very often, the viewpoint of the people affected by fragile statehood is not sufficiently heard. Parts of the international community prioritize their own security policy interests, the motto being the «war on terrorism». People in fragile states, by contrast, are primarily concerned with their own survival and the quest for development opportunities for themselves and their communities.

Fragile states are states which are unable to perform their core functions. As a result, they fail to fulfil their citizens' justified expectations. As a rule, fragile states can be identified by the following criteria:

- The governments in fragile states often have little or no legitimacy in the eyes of their own people.
- The state no longer has the capacity to function or take action and cannot provide its population with basic services (e.g. health or education) or guarantee security.
- There is a low level of social cohesion.
- Fragile states often have a destabilizing effect on their neighbours.

Although some of the challenges posed by fragile states – such as high rates of crime – tend to be urban phenomena, a state's fragility is generally first felt in rural regions, where it affects particularly vulnerable demographic groups. But in developing and transition countries, these rural regions are precisely where most of the population lives. If the instability of the state restricts their opportunities for development, this jeopardizes the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, to which the international community has committed itself.

At the same time, however, it is also important to recognize and pay tribute to the remarkable initiative displayed by rural populations, who have shown that they are capable of guaranteeing law and order and progressing development even when state failure has reached an advanced stage. Nonetheless, «local» self-organization has its limits. It cannot fully replace functioning statehood.

So how does fragile statehood impact on rural development? This question will be explored below, using selected characteristics of state fragility.

When the state has no legitimacy in the eyes of rural people

A key characteristic of fragile states and their governments is that they lack adequate legitimacy in the eyes of their own citizens. Many rural communities are already remote, even in geographical terms, from the centers of political power and the central state's institutions and representatives. These rural regions therefore need to be integrated into the affairs of the state through a functioning political and administrative structure. However, this process requires considerable resources and effort, and when a state is failing, both tend to be absent at a relatively early stage, prompting people in rural regions to turn away from «their state» in frustration.

Maintaining rural infrastructure is one of the most important functions of a central state, but often, this task is not taken seriously. Instead, the government prioritizes the needs of urban voters in this context.

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Dr Armin K. Nolting
Armin.Nolting@gtz.de
Dr Roman Poeschke
Roman.Poeschke@gtz.de
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische
Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH
Eschborn, Germany

This loss of legitimacy is by no means inevitable, however. A state and its government can develop and acquire legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens in two ways: firstly, by guaranteeing political freedom and ensuring that political processes are as democratic as possible. This gives rural communities the sense that they are not helplessly exposed to the arbitrary decisions of the state, but can play a role in shaping these decisions and in monitoring their implementation (input legitimacy). A second major source of legitimacy for citizens is the delivery of key public services by the state, especially the direct provision of general welfare services (output legitimacy).

Input legitimacy is achieved when all stakeholder groups in society can actively contribute to political processes and play a part in decision-making through free and equal elections, freedom of opinion and freedom of assembly. In many developing and transition countries, this participation is naturally easier to achieve in cities than in rural areas, where poorer access to and a lower level of education, difficult conditions in the education sector, an inadequate transport and communications infrastructure, and informal power structures such as patronage networks impede the development of an active civil society.

So from the rural population's perspective, merely establishing democratic processes is not enough. Instead, the state – through the government and administration – must approach rural communities pro-actively and integrate them into the political process. Only in this way will the state and its government gain credibility and recognition as the embodiment of legitimate authority. Only then will the regulations and legislation passed by the

«When the LKMD (village council) calls a meeting, all the decisions about a project or program have already been made that it should be this way and that way. Even an old, helpless, and blind man like Umbu Tamu will be invited to this meeting, along with the rest of the village men. Poor men would all remain silent and only listen. This is despite the fact that we all live with and relate well to each other in the village.»
Statement by a man from Renggarasi, a rural community in Indonesia, quoted in Narayan, Deepa/Petesch, Patti (2002): *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands*. New York, N.Y: Published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press, p. 195.

state be regarded as binding, and only then will there be any willingness to contribute to the functioning of the state by paying taxes and levies. A crucial factor in this context is that all the institutions of state are seen to be operating in the public interest; this requires a reliable and accountable Executive body, a judicial system that is recognized as being fair and accessible, and a Legislative organ which is seen to be properly representing citizens.

When the state does not guarantee welfare and security

If the state fails to perform the functions that citizens view as essential (output legitimacy), its failure generally affects rural communities first of all. Public infrastructure is already weaker in rural

«The only government we have known over the years is the village head».
Statement by a women's group in Jimowa, a remote rural community in Nigeria, quoted in Narayan, Deepa/Petesch, Patti (2002): *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands*. New York, N.Y: Published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press, p. 92.

regions, and fewer qualified people live there than in urban areas. For rural people, who often have to travel great distances, transport infrastructure is especially important. It plays a vital role in enabling rural producers to bring their products to market and facilitates the exchange of goods and services, thereby leading to specialization and growth. But in many fragile states, the government prioritizes the needs of the urban population, with the underlying motive often being to safeguard their own power and avoid urban unrest. The rural population tends to be passed over in the allocation of scarce public resources and capacities.

States are responsible for providing a basic level of services to citizens, for example in the fields of health and education. Even though obvious bottlenecks affect the supply of services to many urban communities in developing and transition countries, it is nonetheless easier to ensure a certain level of service provision to all people in urban areas than in rural regions. Here too, states often fail first at the periphery, i.e. the often hard-to-reach rural regions. One of the reasons for the continuing rural-urban exodus is the better provision of social services – and, of course, job opportunities – in the cities.

While urban people find it easier to access education and health services, they often

encounter another symptom of fragile states at the same time, namely higher crime. The state's difficulties in enforcing the law and in apprehending offenders and bringing them to justice, combined with lacking opportunities to earn a living by legal means, make crime an attractive career option, at least in the short term. One of the key expectations on the state, from the perspective of both rural and urban communities, is that it will guarantee physical security. The state is generally only accepted when people feel that they enjoy some measure of physical security in their daily lives. As with public service provision, the state's monopoly of force in fragile states weakens at the periphery – in other words, in rural regions – first of all. In a worst-case scenario, communities here may suffer from the arbitrary depredations of non-state violent actors as well as encroachments from other, equally unstable, neighbouring states.

When social cohesion is jeopardized

States do not only exist because of functioning institutions, legitimate decision-making and well-performing administrations. Equally important is citizens' perception that there is social cohesion. This facilitates solidarity and community action. But for people in developing and transition countries in particular, society – defined as a national community – is only ever one frame of reference and source of identity among many others, and is often not the strongest. Members of a society are always members of a family, a social class, a clan, a stratum or caste, and a cultural and linguistic community as well. These reference groups are often considerably older than the state and therefore more deeply embedded.

More often than is generally assumed, these identities co-exist in harmony. In some cases, however, they make it more difficult to achieve social cohesion in a

Photo: Glatzer

nation-state. This is especially true in areas where demographic groups exist in relative isolation from each other, due to geographical conditions and a virtually non-existent transport infrastructure. Such cases can be found in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example. Cohesion among the various social groups is further weakened when there is no common experience of history and therefore no sense of community – all of which are bases for the emergence of a social and state identity. As these prerequisites are lacking in some transition and developing countries, combined with deficits in the state's functionality, some

> *«I live in this misery and poverty, and I really do not care for living anymore. Sometimes when I awake in the morning I wish I would never wake up. Look at what the evil ones have done to us. We are a good people, we never hated each other, but the politicians got between us. May they rot in hell!»*
> Statement by Rada, a displaced person in Tombak (Republika Srpska), quoted in Narayan, Deepa/Petesch, Patti (2002): *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands*. New York, N.Y: Published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press, p. 227.

observers now argue that not the state itself is collapsing, but the fiction of the state, which in reality never existed as an actor with functional capacity.

Wherever the state is unable to perform its core functions for the benefit of all the major demographic groups on a more or less equal basis, and the rural regions neglected by the state are mainly inhabited by a single demographic group, the symptoms of social disintegration become reinforced. Such neglected demographic groups turn away from the state in frustration, withdraw into their own

identities and, in a worst-case scenario, develop aggressive potential towards other, supposedly privileged, groups.

Social cohesion is not only impeded by «traditionally» existing social heterogeneity, however: extreme inequalities in living conditions and opportunities for economic and political development can also spark off conflicts which may culminate in social disintegration. Land ownership structures and access to natural resources are key factors underlying such unequal development opportunities in rural regions as well.

Regardless of whether disparities and conflicts in a society have ethnic or economic roots, they pose the greatest risk to the cohesion of the state when they are laid bare, entrenched and politically instrumentalized in a targeted way. Hence explaining fragile statehood in structural terms only goes so far: often, disintegration processes are accompanied by conflicts manipulated by individual interest groups in order to secure power, resources and other advantages for themselves. Practically all the current conflicts described as «traditional» in developing and transition countries are the outcome of manipulation by individual interest groups. In the main, members of the urban elite are the prime movers here. They also tend to be the winners in conflicts; the losers generally live in rural regions.

No stability without integration of the rural regions

A stable state is based on three pillars: the legitimacy of the state, the state's capacity to act and function, and social cohesion. In relation to rural regions and communities, the following factors are significant:

● The state achieves recognition and acceptance among rural populations if it delivers core services. These include public safety, basic services such as

health and education, and predictable access to vital resources such as water and land.

● The state and those in government gain legitimacy if they safeguard citizens' opportunities for political participation. In this context, a key factor is the recognition and integration of the informal or «traditional» forms and mechanisms of governance, which exist primarily in rural regions remote from the centre of power.

● Rural population may organize itself outside the parameters of, or without any involvement by, the state. These «local» structures often view the state as a rival, especially if citizens consider that it demands more in taxes and levies than it delivers in the form of services, e.g. health.

● It takes time to (re)build confidence. Previous negative experiences make citizens mistrustful. The state is often seen as a tool of the urban elites, which use the state to further their own interests and acquire power or financial resources.

● Often, the rural population barely identifies with the nation-state. A stable national identity uniting the various groups within society rarely exists. Building this identity is a key challenge in the stabilization of fragile states.

The international community has recognized fragile states as a global challenge. Greater commitment is now needed, with a focus on the interests of the groups that are hardest hit by their state's failure. The natural disasters which have occurred over the last few years have demonstrated only too clearly that there is no alternative to a well-functioning state which is capable of responding effectively to its citizens' needs.

This article presents the personal opinion of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the official position of their organization.

Violence and arbitrary rule continue for a long time in rural regions after the end of hostilities, as the example of Afghanistan shows.