



Transforming fragile states

Forging a new consensus

J Alexander Thier

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A teal-colored circle containing the text 'Key messages' in white.

Key messages

- The prospect of accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (or ever) dims when viewed through the lens of fragile states. Despite a historic period of decreasing conflict and violence and dramatic improvement in human development, fragility is on the rise, bringing enormous human, political, economic and environmental costs.
- Urgent collective action is needed to reverse these trends. Although the world came together in 2015 to set a framework for sustainable development, global commitment to address conflict and fragility is lacking.
- There are signs of a growing consensus on the need for new tools, approaches and resources. However, it is essential to grapple with the problem at the centre of current failings: fragility is fundamentally a political issue that cannot be resolved by technical approaches alone.
- Five key principles – articulated in the Bellagio Consensus – must form the bedrock for a reinvigorated approach: keeping politics at the centre; local ownership; a transition from donor-led, many priorities to country-led, few priorities; inclusion and engagement from idea to implementation; and confidence-building along the way.
- A movement of actors and institutions must be built, with tools and incentives to make progress in specific contexts based on these principles while also reforming international approaches and practices for the future.

Introduction

Collective action is urgently needed to deal with conflict and violence, forced displacement, food insecurity and other challenges resulting from growing instability and persistent fragility. However, the international consensus and machinery for addressing these challenges is frayed and outmoded. Recent efforts to rethink the approach to fragility from the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and other influential bodies offer promise, but lack an agreed set of principles, political will and sufficient resources to turn potential into progress.

A group of world leaders, including former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, came together with policy experts under the leadership of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), The Rockefeller Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in June 2018 to draft a set of five principles and ten key approaches in order to build a platform for broader dialogue and action. At their core is a simple but powerful idea: *the challenges of fragile states are inherently political, and therefore the starting point must be to keep politics at the centre of approaches to address them.* The resulting Bellagio Consensus seeks to create a movement, bringing together the local leaders responsible for change in fragile environments and international institutions charged with supporting them.

Background

Experience since the Second World War and the establishment of the UN has demonstrated that it is possible for societies that have faced the worst of war, atrocities, division and destruction to become inclusive, peaceful and prosperous. Germany, Japan and South Korea – all thriving democracies – arose from profound devastation to become economic powerhouses. More recently, nations across the world, including Bosnia, Rwanda, Colombia and Viet Nam, have made significant advances in transitioning from armed

conflict, political violence and even genocide to growth and increasingly peaceful relations internally and externally.

The benefits of these transformations have been extraordinary. Average life expectancy in Rwanda doubled between 1992 (28 years) and 2005 (56 years), and today stands at over 67 years (World Bank (n.d.(a))). Average income in Viet Nam rose from less than \$100 per person in 1989 (when the war with Cambodia ended) to over \$2,300 in 2017.¹ Liberia was in the bottom tenth of all countries in the world in terms of citizen voice and accountability in 2003 (World Bank, n.d.(b)), and rose to nearly the 50th percentile by 2017. The experience of these countries demonstrates that dramatic improvements are possible, even when the starting point for the transition is dire.

Each of these journeys from extreme fragility is unique, with peaks and troughs over time, but the cumulative impact is enormous. However, rising violence and political and economic instability impose enormous costs. This can be seen in the rapidly rising numbers of forcibly displaced persons – a 75% increase over the last decade, with nearly 45,000 additional people becoming displaced every day (UNHCR, 2018). Fragile environments prevent or reverse development progress and undermine the global economy. For example, in 1951 the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) had a higher per capita income than South Korea, but today South Korea's is 44 times higher. According to the Global Peace Index, the economic impact of violence on the global economy in 2017 was \$14.8 trillion in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms: nearly \$2,000 per person (Global Peace Index and Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017). The 2013–2016 West Africa Ebola crisis is a seminal example of how fragile states like Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia are less able to contain deadly disease outbreaks. The resulting pandemic took more than 11,000 lives (CDC, 2017), caused global panic and cost \$6 billion in aid and an estimated \$53 billion in economic and social impacts (Reuters, 2018).

1 GDP per capita (current \$) Viet Nam, 1960–2107, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=VN>)

The current situation

The prospect of accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (or ever) dims when viewed through the lens of fragile states (Samman et al., 2018). After a historic period of decrease in conflict and violence and dramatic improvements in human development, fragility is on the rise, bringing enormous human, political, economic and environmental costs. Although many fragile environments have seen improvements over time, others are stuck in ‘fragility traps’ (Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, 2018). Fragile environments encounter a breakdown of the social compact between people and their governments and suffer from deficits of institutional capacity and political legitimacy, which increase the risk of instability and violent conflict, sapping state and society of their resilience to disruptive shocks. The fragility trap further fuels violent extremism, displacement, conflict and famine, creating fundamental obstacles to leaving no one behind, greater peace and prosperity and living sustainably together on our shared planet.

These challenges are a primary reason why we are not on track to end extreme poverty by 2030 (Manuel et al., 2018). The intersection of climate change, conflict and inequality is rendering goals such as ending hunger and reducing violence unreachable. If a concerted and successful effort is not made now to address these already apparent shortfalls, today’s gaps will widen to gulfs in a decade.

Therefore, urgent collective action is needed to reverse these trends. Although the world came together in 2015 to set a framework for sustainable development, *a global commitment to address conflict and fragility is lacking.* There are signs, among civil society actors and major multilateral institutions as well as some world powers, of a growing consensus on the need for new tools, approaches and commitments. This new political landscape is emerging alongside an increased policy focus on fragile states by international institutions and donors. Increased resources, however, must go hand-in-hand with a renewed approach that prioritises politics and local leadership, includes incentives for more inclusive governance, fosters more coordinated action and addresses fragility directly.

However, at this critical moment of need, we lack key elements needed for a successful global effort to counter these trends. Countries and their partners in the international system have failed to prevent, manage or end several long-running, devastating conflicts, which points to a fundamental deficit in current approaches. Indeed, the untended impacts are roiling political systems on every continent and contributing to the greatest period of uncertainty since the creation of the modern international system. Massive investment and/or intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen and South Sudan has not yielded the hoped-for gains, and may have worsened the overall trajectory of conflict. This is a serious burden on the multilateral system and its credibility. A hallmark of these cases is ongoing violence and fractured political environments, with substantial humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding unable to transform the underlying dysfunction.

The New Deal for Fragile States, which emerged from the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011, provides a strong foundational basis for many key principles and approaches to addressing these challenges – including a focus on inclusive politics, country ownership, shared assessment, prioritisation and joint financing. But it is perceived to have largely failed through lack of implementation. Political actors did not commit to the changes needed to address long-term exclusion and grievance, and donors were unwilling to take the short-term risks needed for longer-term development gains (International Dialogue, n.d.).

Critical current discussions about fragility are not limited to the most extreme situations. Like other areas of development, the debate on fragility must become more universal and less about ‘wealthy, stable’ countries helping ‘poor, unstable’ ones. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines fragility as ‘the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks’ (OECD, 2016). Fragility is measured based on an analysis of multiple social, economic and political factors that, when weighed together, indicate a likelihood that rule of law, freedom from violence and economic advancement are severely imperiled.

In this sense all countries – including the wealthiest and most powerful – exhibit signs of fragility. The Fund for Peace annual *Fragile States Index* ranks all countries, from the Central African Republic to Finland, for this very reason (see FFP, 2018). The question is not binary – whether one place or another is fragile or not. Fragility is a multidimensional condition that exists in gradations and with significant subnational variation.² Effective approaches to diagnosing fragility must account for how the collective factors indicate a level of stress and vulnerability inimical to the positive functioning of that society. Many cases of severe fragility are easy to identify – e.g. where there is active and persistent violence, failure of fundamental systems such as national currency, fuel or food supply, and lack of institutional capability to address these problems, as in South Sudan, Afghanistan, or Venezuela today. Others are more difficult – problems might be localised or cyclical, violence may be high but institutions strong, and designations of ‘fragile’ may be controversial. For example, Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa, yet ranks as the 14th most fragile country in the world (Fragile States Index, n.d.).

Aggregate increased financial flows to fragile states are necessary but not sufficient to address the severe challenges to peace, security and human development. Total country-specific overseas development assistance (ODA) to the OECD list of fragile states rose from \$52.4 billion in 2007 to \$68.2 billion in 2016 (OECD, 2018). This 30% increase was largely due to a 144% increase in humanitarian assistance in those places, especially related to Syria.. Numerous donors have committed to devoting increasing amounts of their aid to

fragile environments, with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), for example, committing to 50% (DFID, 2018). This is likely to increase further, and numerous donors have made a commitment to focusing on fragile states in their recent strategies.³

A way forward

Just as there is a consensus that national and international actors are falling short in addressing these critical imperatives, there are also efforts under way to reinvigorate effective action. UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 calls for peaceful, inclusive and just societies – a critical missing piece of the Millennium Development Goals – and provides some foundational basis for greater collective action, resolve and accountability. The UN Secretary-General has set out agendas on Sustaining Peace and on Prevention, and the UN and the World Bank have committed to joint action in their recent *Pathways for peace* report. In 2017, the World Bank doubled resources to countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence (World Bank, n.d.(c)). The report of the David Cameron-chaired LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development has contributed to renewed attention to the issue, and a USIP bipartisan task force is proposing new ways to tackle the roots of extremism in fragile states (USIP, 2018). New in-depth research, including from the ODI-led Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), is producing a wealth of evidence on the ways in which people living in conflict-affected situations access basic services, perceive their government and state and attempt to recover their livelihoods after conflict.

2 Indices of fragility have become a virtual cottage industry. The World Bank publishes a list of fragile places each year since 2006 under an ever-evolving nomenclature of fragile and conflict affected states, low-income countries under stress, and now the harmonised list of fragile situations for 2019 identifies 35 countries and one territory as fragile. The methodology can be accessed at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PROJECTS/Resources/40940-1404407793868/9611975-1404407810503/PCPI_Q&A_2013_2.pdf. The OECD produces an annual *States of fragility* report that in 2018 identified 58 countries as fragile or extremely fragile as measured against five dimensions: political, societal, environmental, economic and security.

3 See, for example, Dutch Ministry of Trade and Development Cooperation (2018), which says ‘the focus of development cooperation is shifting to the unstable regions of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, with a view to tackling the root causes of poverty, migration, terrorism and climate change’.

But these encouraging steps are not enough. *There is an urgent opportunity to seize this moment and turn this emerging consensus into sustained action that can make a difference.*

The first step is to clearly define the principles that will drive reform and action, based on the experience of the last two decades.

The Bellagio Consensus⁴

To build momentum towards action, ODI, The Rockefeller Foundation and USIP convened a group of world leaders and top experts to wrestle with finding a critical path forward on the future of fragile states. The goal was to identify a consensus on key principles and clear recommendations for addressing challenges that will enable coordinated international action and significant progress at scale. Those five principles are explored here.

Principle 1 Keeping politics at the centre

Political, social and economic exclusion and a lack of the credible, and capable, institutions required to support inclusion are the irreducible core of why some societies experience fragility and crisis. Establishing and maintaining a basic degree of peace and security by channelling conflict into just, non-violent, inclusive political processes must, therefore, be a fundamental goal of fragile countries and those who support them. In every case where substantial progress has been made, it has been accomplished through robust and resilient national leadership backed by their own people and supported by concerted efforts by regional and international actors, institutions and resources.

It is imperative that the politics of fragility (what causes it, what corrects it) serve as the

central lens for analysis, planning and action. If other initiatives fail to flow from or support strengthening the social contract and building effective, inclusive, responsive, accountable institutions, they are likely to be undermined. Yet an important independent assessment of the New Deal found that ‘implementation has been dominated by technical responses. Normative commitments to inclusivity are proving difficult to translate into practice’ (OECD/NYU, 2016).

For instance, some power-sharing arrangements, including electoral processes, may entrench criminal, corrupt actors who act with impunity and harden divisions or impair broader legitimacy. Thus, we often end up with a triumph of process over politics: a technically sound election that delivers instability. Another common example is when efforts to rapidly deliver programmes and services (the vaunted ‘quick wins’) are criticised by local governments for creating ‘parallel structures’ that not only fail to build local institutions and capacity, but also undermine government legitimacy.⁵ More must be done to ensure that all actors sufficiently understand the political economy – a necessity for identifying political reforms that will drive positive change without reinforcing previous patterns of fragility. How we ensure that all the actors – political, security, economic, development – are aligned around this first principle is a key consideration (see for example, Manuel et al., 2017).

Principle 2 Local leadership and ownership are key

The one iron law of development is the need for ‘local’ or ‘country’ ownership. This is especially true for the very issues at the heart of

4 The Rockefeller Foundation, USIP and ODI convened a group of world leaders and top experts in June 2018 to discuss ‘The future of fragile states’. The group included the former UN Secretary-General, late Kofi Annan, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of the African Development Bank Donald Kaberuka, UN Special Envoy Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, OECD Development Assistance Committee Chair Charlotte Petri-Gornitzka, Professor Paul Collier, Under-Secretary-General Vera Songwe, and others, including senior representatives from the World Bank, the G7+, entrepreneurs and civil society organisations.

5 ‘Donor financed and staffed with well-paid technical assistants (TAs), such parallel structures, help ensure that basic functions of government are performed in the aftermath of conflict. But these short-term results can come at a high, long-term cost to state building. Parallel structures risk being unsustainable and can undermine efforts to strengthen the government’s own legitimacy and capacity, in particular by driving up salaries and increasing competition for competent staff in the local labor market’ (Blum et al., 2019).

fragility – politics, peace, law, justice – even as the capacity for ownership and execution are often at their weakest. Thus, the path to peace and strengthened social contracts must be led by legitimate local actors, with appropriate support from external actors. No amount of goodwill, resources or military might can create the conditions for sustainable peace without an inclusive political settlement and a minimum level of capacity that enables local actors to make and own the victories – and the mistakes.

But ‘local’ should mean a complex array of systems and networks, not an exclusive group of individuals or institutions. The path out of fragility must be walked by a large, leaderful coalition – including women, civil society, former combatants, marginalised groups, youth, business and religious leaders. There must also be checks and balances to allow local ownership to escape the exclusionary tendencies that lead to violence and fragility. As Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said in her Nobel acceptance speech, ‘We must build space and respect for opposition voices; they are not the losers in our open society, but an essential component to strengthened accountability in government’.

However, we cannot hide from the fact that external actors – whether diplomats, donors, security forces, major private sector players – are also political actors. It is essential to understand the interplay of resources, power and capacity between internal and external actors to consciously shape them to support, not supplant, local ownership.

Nor can we ignore that local leaders in fragile environments will include some authoritarians, war criminals or corruptors. How to promote local ownership of the agenda without giving carte blanche to un-inclusive regimes, and where to draw the line (or conditions) on support are key areas to grapple with.

Principle 3 Transition from donor-led, many priorities to country-led, few priorities

Local and international leadership must be aligned around a few basic priorities that address the root causes of fragility, with consistent,

focused evaluation and adjustment to remain on track amid hard choices. But given the sources of funding, strong national interests and lack of local capacity, how do we align the agendas of global, regional and national ‘capitals’ with the local agenda, rather than external agendas driving local priorities?

Prioritisation, coordination and alignment of internal and external actors are essential elements of success, yet virtually every significant analysis of responses to fragile states highlights a lack of coherent ‘common purpose’ as a key failing. While there is no right answer about what to prioritise, there must be a consensus and commitment involving all leading actors. In short, we must transition from *donor-led, many priorities* to *country-led, few priorities*.

Although there are few international mechanisms for joint action, ‘compacts’ have gained traction as critical organising tools that embody basic principles, such as conditionality. Such compacts can help drive the significant change needed in the interaction and coherence of the security, political/diplomatic and humanitarian and development systems, helping to accelerate the reengagement of the private sector. A key to successful, focused compacts will be the ability to create a common frame through dialogue, shared data and analysis, to identify priorities and the potential for progress. The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework for Afghanistan was a significant example, with the international community and the Afghan government coming together for an in-depth effort at analysis, negotiation over goals and compacting with accountability mechanisms (Ruder, 2015).

There are significant challenges to meaningfully improving compacts. In many fragile countries, competing interests of neighbours may undermine progress, as they may have substantial influence in the region and be less amenable to diplomatic and compacting processes led by the international community.⁶ We must also remain aware of the contestation of priority-setting between local actors. Who decides between competing priorities, especially in divided polities? Evidence from past

⁶ It is striking the extent to which conflict-affected countries treated as a ‘unit’ by entities like the UN are in fact enmeshed in regional conflicts with more powerful actors which, left unresolved, make stability virtually impossible. The relationships between South Sudan and Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Bosnia and Serbia illustrate this dynamic.

performance suggests this is not an easy road, either for international partners or local leaders. Prioritisation is an inherently political process, requiring consensus and trust that are often severely lacking, and proactive redistribution of power and authority. Like any agreement among a complex array of actors, producing alignment and enforcement requires an agreed frame of reference, a mechanism for defining and recording elements of agreement and a process by which they will be measured and amended, and means to address accountability and grievances. Accountability must be reciprocal, including for external actors to agree and stick to local priorities.

Principle 4 Inclusion and engagement from idea to implementation

A key conclusion of recent fragile states assessments has been that the failure to involve all necessary national and international political, security, development, economic, humanitarian and social actors in dialogue and prioritisation will hinder progress and can contribute to crisis. New Deal compacts and other such approaches cannot be seen as technical agreements between primarily development actors, but must include key political actors, the private sector and other elements that have significant influence on the path to sustainable peace and security.

It is essential to support the transition from political dialogue to implementation, so that action remains within the frame of the political, and key stakeholders (and disruptors) are included. There are often cultural or institutional divides within domestic and international institutions that systematically separate key actors, for example divisions between political and development actors, civilians and military.

Principle 5 Build confidence

Confidence in the prospect of long-term economic, social and political progress is essential.

Appearances matter in building a positive cycle of legitimacy. There must be a realistic,

achievable, hopeful agenda for citizens to believe, buy into and witness over time. Fragile environments are marked by low public trust and high discounting of the future. We should therefore reject planning that purports to need progress on everything at once or to pursue unrealistic timelines, instead focusing on concrete, achievable and even partial successes. There must be a basis for growing confidence in the political system (to produce leadership and enable accountability), in economics (to produce decent work, food security, etc.), in government (to enable access to basic services like health care, education, housing/land, water, energy, telecommunications, banking) and in society (to move forward from past violence and division). It is important, however, that the basis for confidence does not rely on ‘creating Denmark’, i.e. a vast array of new laws, systems and institutions that are both unrealistic and potentially mismatched for the environment.⁷

It is also important to invest early in measuring public perception over time. While individual polls can provide little guidance, a series of questions, asked periodically, can help assess trends and develop a shared agenda and sense of progress in a country, as well as identify those issues and geographic regions where more attention is needed.⁸ Developing strong local survey capabilities is also beneficial for many fields, especially public health and social safety net programmes.

Conclusion and next steps: from principles to action

The world is facing a persistent set of challenges emerging from fragile environments. The two billion people living amid fragility are systematically denied the opportunities and dignity that every person is entitled to. Premature death, dislocation, malnutrition, trauma and oppression too often define a life in such circumstances. These blights do not respect

7 For an analysis of ‘isomorphic mimicry’ and the practice of overloading expectations and external models on weak and fragile states, see Pritchett et al. (2012).

8 The Asia Foundation’s annual Survey of the Afghan People since 2004 has been a critical tool and record of changing public perceptions.

borders. Disease, displacement, environmental degradation and violence in fragile environments have impacts that diffuse regionally and globally, undermining security, health, climate and norms.

Leaders in these societies, and those in the partner nations and international institutions supporting them, cannot abide these conditions. Left unchecked, they undermine progress on critical issues in all our societies. Yet despite considerable attention and resources, efforts to make progress too often do not deliver results. This is rarely because the right ‘technical’ solution does not exist, or because poor countries are unable to support functioning economic and political systems. It is rather because of a failure to address the fundamental political issues that drive fragility, and to adjust approaches to be able to do so effectively.

That is why the recognition at the heart of the Bellagio Consensus is profound: the combined enterprise of supporting fragile states must keep politics at the centre, or even the most effective programmes will fail to deliver sustainable outcomes. Therefore, getting the principles right is critical. We know, however, that even when well-intentioned approaches are informed by the right principles, the complexity of fragile environments can still confound them. In complex environments where decisions are difficult and choices are often sub-optimal, strategies that depend on achieving a long series of preordained goals will fall short. Therefore, we must embrace approaches that will enable good choices, maximise the potential to learn and adapt and cultivate a coalition of actors in support of positive change.

Taking principles to action will be key to making progress and building a movement of actors and institutions that can go from a positive case to a broad-based approach. Here, we recommend several approaches that will be essential to bringing key actors together in a stronger framework for action on fragile states that keeps politics at the centre of a dynamic process.

- Cultivate a *vanguard of change* in key countries and institutions. A key to successful

country ownership and organisational transformation is to make sure that there is support for actors in the institutions and systems – local, national and international – that will ultimately be responsible for driving change. This can be done by setting incentives to motivate those actors and their institutions, and creating networks to share learning and experience.⁹

- Look for *pivotal moments* to make progress on new approaches. Opportunity to change approaches and outcomes will be strongest when there is a period when the ‘cement is wet’. This pertains to big moments – leadership changes, transformative processes (peace agreement, a new constitution), major political openings – as well as smaller ones – a new national development strategy, a pledging conference. While fragile states are vulnerable to internal and external shocks, these can also be opportunities for reform (provided donors can mobilise any needed support quickly enough).
- *Set the frame for a common agenda* that is relevant to grassroots perspectives, national leaders and international actors. Having a common and agreed set of data, assumptions, perceptions and targets is key to making joined-up approaches work. And this work needs to be done regularly, rather than undertaking large, static ‘assessments’ that are only updated every few years. Too often there is no mechanism to create that common agenda, to work through disagreements about priorities, and to make it a living process rather than formal and brittle. This needs to be locally owned, with regional and international support. One proposal, for example, is to make UN mandates provisional for six months to include consultation with an array of actors and avoid internationally driven goal setting. The new UN coordinator system being put into place can also be a key enabler of such an approach. Another is to strengthen the peer learning being done through initiatives like the g7+ Secretariat created to coordinate dialogue among the self-identified fragile states in the New Deal framework.

⁹ Progress has been made in recent years on getting ‘systems thinking’ into the mindset of donors (see, for example, USAID, 2014).

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- Introduce *iterative approaches and adaptive management* to ensure tight feedback loops between action, monitoring, learning and adapting. Getting results is not easy anywhere, but in the most challenging environments it is critical to be adaptive as things change rapidly, and we encounter both unexpected hurdles and successes. The more dynamic the environment and the bigger the changes, the more likely that the path to change will differ from what was planned. We must deploy the instruments and the people who have the capacity to adapt.¹⁰
 - Develop an *influence strategy and build a bigger coalition*, getting more stakeholders on board. Those committed to building a new approach will have to ‘eat the industry from the inside out’, working on the agglomeration of institutions, events, engagements and policy opportunities to build consensus and drive a new approach. We will need to get these principles and approaches onto the OECD, World Bank/IMF, G7 and G20 agendas and look to a potential pivotal moment (e.g. UNGA) for a significant convening on the way forward on fragile states.

¹⁰ There is an important and growing literature on these themes under various rubrics: adaptive management, thinking and working politically, problem-driven iterative adaptation. See, for example, Laws (2018); PDIA for building state capability (<https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/publications/policy-area/pdia-building-state-capability>); Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (2018); Booth (2018).

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ODI

203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

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