Addressing Fragility—A New Learning Agenda

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"Despite the decades of scholarship and hard-earned experience, we have yet to come up with an effective and sustainable approach to fragile states." William Burns, Michèle Flournoy, and Nancy Lindborg deserve credit for acknowledging this reality and stating it clearly. Part of the strategy they describe to build that effective and sustainable approach is increased investment in learning and evaluation, noting: "The United States needs a more robust learning agenda to collect data from past fragile-states engagements and incorporate lessons learned into future endeavors."[1] As a longtime proponent and practitioner of monitoring, evaluation, and learning, I find it heartening to see this in the paper. However, if decades of scholarship have not gotten us to where we want, clearly something needs to change in regard to *how* we are pursuing the learning agenda in regard to fragility. We either need to change what we are learning or change the way we are using that learning. Doing more of the same kind of research, and using that research in the same way, is not the answer.

It is also heartening to see the Fragility Study Group's (FSG) paper refer to a learning agenda instead of simply referring to the need for more research or evidence. Implementing a learning agenda requires conducting research and gathering evidence, but also forces us to grapple with questions of how organizations will learn from that evidence and how they will apply it to undertake more effective initiatives.

The goal of this paper is to describe what we need to do to develop and implement a more robust and effective learning agenda focused on addressing fragility that effectively informs policy decisions. In doing so, the paper will discuss both *what we need to learn* and *how we need to learn*. In particular, the paper makes three overarching recommendations:

1. Focus our learning agenda on the "collective wisdom" on supporting peace and stability in fragile states articulated in the FSG paper.
2. Prioritize developing a better understanding of how to foster inclusion across all social sectors

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and addressing the challenges to "working politically" that often hinder research on inclusion.

3. Develop and support learning systems that create rapid feedback loops and that break down the distinction between learning and implementation.

This paper will take a peace-building perspective. My background is in field-based peace building; applied research on peace-building programs; and working with organizations to improve their monitoring, evaluation, learning systems. Thus, my primary frame for this paper is the field-based program. I will (mostly) leave discussions on topics such as global policy, interagency processes, and congressional relations to others contributing to the FSG.

FOCUSING THE LEARNING AGENDA: FINDING THE CHOLESTEROL

Elsewhere I have argued that what peace building needs is to find its cholesterol.[2] Preventing heart disease, like peace building or addressing fragility, is a long-term endeavor, the success of which can often only be assessed after 20 to 30 years. Medical practitioners, however, often don't focus on heart disease directly; they focus on reducing cholesterol. The consensus among doctors is that reducing cholesterol will reduce heart disease in the long run. Cholesterol provides a measurable goal on which to focus that is credibly linked to the longer-term goal.

In the paper, Burns, Flournoy, and Lindborg describe the current collective wisdom for supporting peace and stability in fragile states. This collective wisdom is drawn from both the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) and the goals of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. The three most substantive elements of the collective wisdom are candidates to be the cholesterol of addressing fragility: 1) Improve justice and security for all citizens; 2) Support legitimate, inclusive government; 3) Create inclusive, equitable

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economic growth. These goals are medium-term compared with the generational effort of addressing fragility.[3] These are measurable goals, and the current consensus holds that if you make progress on these goals, then you have also made progress on the longer-term goal of addressing fragility.

That peace building and the fragility agenda *has* a conventional wisdom remains underappreciated in my view. It is something that the young field of peace building has never had. The crystallization of this consensus over the last 10 years or so creates an important moment for research and learning on addressing fragility. The whole idea of a learning agenda is premised on the existence of a shared framework consisting of a common set of guiding research questions. In the absence of consensus about the central research questions pertaining to fragility, research activity proceeds without agreement on definitions of key concepts, standards for support-

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ing or falsifying evidence, or clarity about how to compare results from one study to another. In short, without this shared framework, research happens but learning does not. Crucially, and perhaps counterintuitively, this shared framework is important even if the current consensus is wrong. We can only learn answers to hard questions by focusing our efforts on specific sets of hypotheses and then seeing which are supported and which are not.

So within this shared framework, what types of research are needed? I would argue there are two broad categories. Again, the cholesterol analogy is apt. The first type of research would improve our knowledge of how to create the key medium-term results, that is, how to reduce cholesterol. So, for instance: What are the most effective strategies for

improving security at the community level? How can access to justice be increased in post-conflict situations? How do external actors support more inclusive politics in the face of violent spoilers?

The second type of research would improve our understanding of the mechanisms by which achieving the medium-term results leads to less fragility in the longer run – that is, what is the link between cholesterol and heart disease. This longer-term research effort would serve to interrogate the current consensus. When research supports the conventional wisdom, we can be more confident that achieving medium-term results does actually reduce fragility in the longer run. Research that investigates how medium-term results improve broader state-society relations such that the likelihood of armed conflict and instability has been diminished would reinforce the rationale for making a focus on fragility a policy priority, as well as allow policymakers to demonstrate the impact of that focus on fragility. In areas where the research does not support the conventional wisdom, that wisdom will change. Just as medical researchers have found the link between cholesterol and heart disease to be more complex than they originally assumed, the current consensus on the drivers of fragility will evolve over time.

Thus, for policymakers and practitioners, the first type of research will allow them to understand whether what they are doing is effective. The second type of research will allow them to make informed decisions about what they should do.

Actions

- Create and support a comprehensive, international research initiative focused on SDG 16 and the goals of the New Deal. Link this research effort directly with the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding and the working-level forum on fragility recommended in the FSG paper.

FOSTERING INCLUSION: SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Above, I described the need for a comprehensive research initiative centered on the conventional wisdom described in the FSG paper. This conventional wisdom contains a set of challenges cutting across multiple domains – security, justice, political, and economic. The danger is that this is too broad a set of topics for a focused, meaningful research agenda. However, there is a common theme underlying this diverse set of topics: how to foster inclusion. The FSG paper discusses security and justice *for all*; government characterized by *inclusive politics*; and *inclusive*, equitable economic growth. Similarly, the first line in Sustainable Development Goal 16 is "Promote *inclusive*, peaceful societies." The issue of inclusion is the sun around which all the other fragility issues orbit.

The question of how to foster inclusion should be central to the learning agenda on fragility. To make this happen, two challenges will need to be overcome – one on the supply side, one on the demand side. The supply side problem is caused by the fact that research initiatives are almost always organized by social sector. Universities, for instance, have departments devoted to law, criminology, political science, and economics. As a result, research on crosscutting themes such as inclusion either gets less attention or gets siloed within a particular discipline. So, for instance, solid research has been done on inclusive political settlements[4] and on inclusive economic growth, but these research programs rarely interact with each other; nor is there much effort being undertaken to pull broader lessons about how to foster inclusion across various sectors and for broader societywide goals, such as addressing fragility. Research and learning must be organized in order to break silos so that policymakers may craft approaches to fragility that are rooted in a holistic understanding of the problem set. This will help generate integrated solutions instead of siloed strategies that often serve to undermine actors in the fragile state setting.[5]

The problem on the demand side is caused by the fact that the question of how to foster inclusion is inherently political. By this I don't mean it has to do with government or the political system; I mean that across all the different social sectors, fostering inclusion inevitably raises thorny issues about how identity groups compete for access to political power, as opposed to more technocratic ones. Inclusion raises perhaps the most fundamental questions about a polity or community: Who has rights? Who has a voice? Who deserves protection? Who has

a claim to resources? As William Easterly, among many others, has argued, there is a widespread tendency within international development and related fields to focus on technical issues, while shying away from political issues.[6] This is a problem for applied research on inclusion. By definition, for research to be *applied*, the audience needs to apply its findings. If this audience desires technical solutions to technical problems, such as election monitoring or case management at the Ministry of Justice, this is the type of applied research that will be produced. In contrast, demand for applied research on fostering inclusion requires policymakers and practitioners to become more comfortable working politically, meaning a consistent focus on "power dynamics, incentives, interests, and institutions."[7] While awareness of the need to focus more explicitly on political dynamics is growing, the Thinking and Working Politically initiative notes that "changing aid practices has proven much more difficult than raising levels of knowledge and awareness among donor staff, undertaking 'set-piece' political-economy analysis, and drafting more nuanced policy statements."[8]

There is always a chicken-and-egg issue with research and practice – research chases practice, and practice chases research. But we seem to be at a moment where, to continue to strengthen and expand a learning agenda with a clear focus on fostering inclusion, practice has to shift. If policymakers and practitioners commit to working politically, the demand for research to support those efforts will follow. Without those clear demand signals, important research on fostering inclusion will continue to be done, but won't move to the center of the learning agenda for addressing fragility.

Actions:

- Initiate research projects, or leverage existing research efforts, to incentivize cutting-edge, multisector research on how to foster inclusion.

- Ramp up and support ongoing efforts to increase the desire and capacity of policymakers and practitioners to "work politically." Ensure these efforts have robust research and learning components in order to increase the demand for applied research on fostering inclusion.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING: THE NEED FOR SPEED

It has often been the case that research and learning are considered separate from implementation. Research provides an evidence base to design an intervention. Evidence is gathered from that intervention to inform research. That research then informs the next intervention. This process creates a traditional feedback loop of act >> assess >> learn >> act. The Lessons Learned Program run by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction is one example. While these kinds of feedback loops are crucial, they often operate on a timespan of five to 10 years. It has become clear that for learning processes to improve our ability to address fragility, we need to combine these types of longer-term research and lessons-learned processes with processes that create more rapid feedback loops and continuous leaning.

Why more rapid feedback loops? There is a growing consensus within the broader development field that effective programming requires implementation that is flexible and adaptive. When working on complex initiatives in rapidly changing environments, the arguments goes, we must be able to adapt our initiatives based on what we learn during implementation. Examples based on this argument include Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) and the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Collaborate, Learn, Adapt (CLA) initiative. The World Bank's upcoming "World Development Report on Governance and Law" also reportedly champions these ideas.[9]

There is also hard evidence that adaptive management does create more effective projects. For instance, Duncan Green, a strategic adviser for Oxfam Great Britain, reviewed two studies that combined assessed over 14,000 development projects. The studies find that, in general, giving program implementers flexibility to adapt to changing realities makes their projects more effective. That impact is stronger in complex environments such as conflict zones. A recent evaluation of USAID reconciliation programming similarly found that "programs are most effective when they are adaptively implemented."

Thus, the evidence tells us that adaptive

management is important for the success of development interventions, and even more important when undertaking complex interventions such as addressing fragility. As the FSG paper notes, a *systemic* approach to addressing fragility "in all its interconnected dimensions" is required. Adaptation and ongoing learning are centerpieces of any systemic approach.

The previous sections in this paper have described the deeper, more long-term research necessary to inform and learn from our interventions to address fragility. Alongside these deeper research efforts, we need to strengthen the systems that create rapid feedback loops and continuous learning during interventions.

First, we need to improve data collection. In any feedback loop, data needs to be collected. Collecting data in fragile environments is difficult, dangerous work. Beyond traditional security concerns, information is enormously sensitive in fragile environments and both information collectors and providers are often targeted. In my work at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), we began to call data collection "the last-mile problem." All the program designs, performance monitoring plans, and learning sessions mean nothing if you can't collect data in that last mile. It is the foundation on which everything rests.

Traditionally, data collection during projects has been done as part of project monitoring and therefore left to individual program implementers. This worked when monitoring data was collected primarily to track implementation of project activities. To collect data that can be used not just to track activities, but to inform shifts in program strategy, we need to collect better data, collect it more rigorously, and collect it more often. Perhaps most importantly, we need to use ongoing data collection to assess whether programs are producing the outcomes, that is, the positive social changes, that we care about in a given context. It is only through ongoing assessment of progress at the outcome level that continuous learning can take place.

Given the difficulty in collecting data in fragile environments, undertaking this type of data collection is beyond the reach of individual project implementers, or even individual U.S. government (USG) agencies. As a result, policymakers and practitioners need to shift their approach from requiring individual agencies and implementing organizations to do their own data collection and analysis to an approach that invests in "common goods." These might include shared data collection instruments, shared groups of enumerators, openly available data collection tools, data sharing platforms, or pooled capacity for data analysis and visualization.

There are emerging examples of these kinds of shared data efforts. USIP's IMPACT Project in the Central African Republic and the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Virtual Platform for Peace and Development in Pakistan are two examples. However, these emerging efforts are often small-scale, proof-of-concept initiatives. For shared data collection efforts to truly support continuous learning and adaptive implementation, they need

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to be integrated as a core component in fragility intervention.

Second, we need to improve our ability to act on what the data are telling us.[10] I mentioned above that adaptive management practices are beginning to get a foothold among some of the major donors working in fragile states, including USAID and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID). What remains unclear is whether initiatives like GLAM and CLA will exist in parallel with the line programming of these agencies or whether they will have a more fundamental impact on the way these agencies operate.

In a previous piece for *Foreign Policy* on how peace-building programming is implemented, I argued that there needs to be a shift from a system that allows some flexible, adaptive programming to a system that demands it. If we believe, given the complex challenge of addressing fragility, that flexible, adaptive programming is more effective, then this form of programming has to be required at every level. It is only through demanding adaptive

programming that we can incentivize agencies and organizations to build the necessary management systems, learning systems, and data collection systems to learn differently and work differently.

The scope of this challenge is significant. As Andrew Natsios notes in his paper on the counter-bureaucracy, development programming is increasingly concerned with compliance issues as opposed to technical and substantive concerns. Compliance requirements invariably create more rigid as opposed to more adaptive programming. And these compliance regimes are deeply entrenched within the USG bureaucracy. However, a new administration, with control over hundreds of appointments, can disrupt these regimes if it sends a clear message that to address fragility effectively, the way agencies work must change. Moreover, the existence of initiatives such as GLAM and CLA does create a small beachhead on which to create greater broader changes within the USG.

To recap, effectively addressing fragility requires continuous learning before, during, and after interventions. But for that continuous learning to be meaningful, and for it to be incentivized, organizations and agencies must be able to shift their strategies and adapt their programming based on what they are learning. Thus, learning and implementation, instead of being separated, become tightly integrated, and perhaps in the best case indistinguishable from each other.

Actions

- Invest in collecting, leveraging, and analyzing data during interventions. Invest not just in projects but in "common goods," shared data collection and analysis efforts that a variety of local, national, and international organizations and agencies can leverage.

- Ramp up and support ongoing efforts to expand adaptive management practices within key USG agencies. Signal early and often in the new administration that this is a top priority and mission-critical if we are to successfully address fragility.

CONCLUSION

The FSG paper describes a USG approach to fragility that is focused and strategic but also addresses fragility challenges in an integrated, systemic way. Success in pushing forward a learning agenda to accompany this approach also requires both a clear focus and a systemic approach that integrates research, learning, and implementation.

Fragility is a complex topic and could give rise to a large number of research topics. But for perhaps the first time, a broad consensus is emerging on the "cholesterol" of fragility. At the core of that consensus is the issue of inclusion. Understanding how to foster inclusion will drive forward the research agenda on addressing fragility across of range of social sectors. Focusing research on the collective wisdom laid out in the FSG paper will allow us to leverage that consensus in the short to medium run, and to test that consensus in the longer run.

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It is not enough, however, to simply do better and more-focused research. To truly push forward a robust, effective learning agenda, we need to think in a more systemic way about integrating applied research, learning, and practice.[11] Doing so is necessary to create rapid feedback loops and continuous learning, which in turn are necessary to support flexible and adaptive implementation of interventions to address fragility. In other words, we need more than new and better research, evidence, or lessons-learned processes. Designing and implementing successful efforts to address fragility requires nothing less than a shift from a perspective that sees learning as informing practice to a perspective that sees learning *as* practice.

NOTES

1   William J. Burns, Michèle A. Flournoy, Nancy E. Lindborg, "U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility" (Fragility Study Group, September 2016), 26.

2   For the purposes of this paper, peace building will be considered synonymous with addressing fragility.

3   "World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development" (World Bank, 2011), 109.

4   See also Bruce Jones, Molly Elgin-Cossart, and Jane Esberg, "Pathways out of Fragility: The Case for a Research Agenda on Inclusive Political Settlements in Fragile States," (U.K. Department for International Development, 2012).

5   One partial exception is the research effort on building legitimacy (a sister concept to inclusion) by the Institute for Human Security at Tufts University. This project focuses on four sectors within society – service delivery, political inclusion, security sector reform, and corruption. For an overview, see Eileen Babbitt, Ian Johnstone, and Dyan Mazurana, "Building Legitimacy in Conflict-affected and Fragile States," Policy Brief Series 1, Number 1 (Institute for Human Security, June 2016).

6   William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

7   "The case for thinking and working politically: The implications of 'doing development differently,'" http://publications.dlprog.org/TWP.pdf; Niheer Dasandi, Heather Marquette, and Mark Robinson, "Thinking and Working Politically: From Theory Building to Building an Evidence Base," Research Paper 37 (Developmental Leadership Program, January 2016); and Alina Rocha Menocal, "Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently" (Overseas Development Institute, March 2014).

8   "The Case for Thinking and Working Politically," 2.

9   Duncan Green, "The World Bank is having a big internal debate about Power and Governance. Here's why it matters," From Poverty to Power blog on oxfamblogs.org, July 26, 2016, http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-world-bank-is-having-a-big-internal-debate-about-power-and-governance-heres-why-it-matters/.

10 The FSG paper does call for expanding investment in big-data analytics tools. The challenge of leveraging that data for continuous learning requires a concomitant investment in changing project design, management, and implementation strategies. Burns, Flournoy, and Lindborg, "U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility," 24.

11 Note that this is not an argument to eliminate more basic forms of research. Research on more basic questions relevant to fragility should continue to be conducted, primarily in the academy. This is an argument to more tightly link the applied research being supported or conducted by the USG to the practice being supported or conducted by the USG.