

The European Union's ambiguous concept of 'state fragility'

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Although scholars and practitioners alike perceive 'state fragility' to be a key challenge for security and development, there are significant variations in the definition of this phenomenon. This article analyses the European Union's notion of 'state fragility'. Based on a document analysis covering the years 2001–12 and expert interviews conducted in November 2012, the article reveals that the EU has not (yet) decided on a clear-cut definition of 'state fragility'. Three factors explain this lack of decisiveness: the EU's complex institutional framework, which impedes policy coherence; developments at the international level that require the EU's compliance; and the organisation's diplomatic efforts to maintain cooperative relationships with aid-recipient countries that have been labelled 'fragile'. The result is conceptual ambiguity that potentially reduces the EU's capacity to respond to fragile situations.

Keywords: EU; fragile state; fragility; security; development; aid; state building

Introduction

Especially since the events of 9/11 'state fragility' has been perceived by scholars and practitioners alike as a major threat to security and a problem for development.¹ Despite some convergences and overlaps, there are significant variations in how various donor governments and international agencies define 'state fragility' and in which countries they include in their lists of 'fragile' states.² Disparities in working definitions can be found even between different departments in the same government: security agencies typically emphasise the threat aspect, while development cooperation agencies focus on relationships or functions, and diplomats tend to avoid the concept altogether.³ To increase conceptual clarity and to explore the notion of 'state fragility' found in one of the major global players in international affairs, this article investigates the EU's notion of 'state fragility' in detail, asking: how does the European Union define state fragility, and how can the development of the EU's concept of state fragility be explained?

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The EU has been chosen for this study because of its financial and normative importance. The organisation controls substantial material resources and is among the largest donors of official development assistance (ODA). In 2010 the EU and its member states spent €53.5 billion on aid, corresponding to 0.44% of the member states' combined gross national income (GNI). In this way the EU collectively accounted for 58% of net ODA to developing countries and for 65% of the global €26 billion ODA increase from 2004 to 2010.⁴ Its main executive body, the European Commission, influences the spending of roughly one-fifth of this aid, as it both coordinates the foreign aid spending of the member states and acts as an independent aid donor.⁵ In addition to its financial power, the EU also pursues a strong normative agenda in its foreign affairs related to the promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law.⁶ As an organisation it claims added value in the form of its capacity to implement best practices 'that build high international credibility in promoting human rights, pursuing democratisation, including electoral observation, and improving governance'.⁷ Clearly, what the EU decides and how it behaves have an impact on both the donors who align their strategy to the EU's and on the recipient states that negotiate terms of cooperation with the EU.⁸

Given its financial and moral importance, it is astonishing that there have been no studies (with the exception of Hout's) in security, development or state-building research to explicitly address the Union's policy towards fragile states, nor any that examine the underlying 'state fragility' concept.⁹ This contribution will close this gap. Going beyond Hout, the analysis focuses on elaborating the Union's notion of 'state fragility', seeking to explain its development. However, the article will not discuss the specific policy instruments employed by the EU to deal with fragile states, nor the effectiveness of EU policies in 'fragile' contexts.

The analysis is built upon an examination of the documents published by the EU bodies most directly concerned with fragile states, including the European Commission's Directorates-General Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid (DEVCO) and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Council and (since 2010) the European External Action Service (EEAS). The investigation covers the period from 2001 (when the international interest in state fragility spiked as a result of 9/11) to 2012. The document analysis is complemented by interviews conducted in Brussels in November 2012 with representatives of DEVCO, EEAS and several think-tanks active in the field of EU development cooperation.¹⁰

Based on these data, the article reveals that the EU has not (yet) decided upon a clear-cut definition of 'state fragility', despite substantial EU internal discussions on the topic. Three factors explain this lack: first, the EU's complex institutional framework, which impedes policy coherence; second, developments at the international level that require the EU's compliance; and, third, the EU's diplomatic efforts to maintain cooperative relationships with aid-recipient countries that have been labelled 'fragile'. The result is conceptual ambiguity that potentially reduces the EU's capacity to respond to fragile situations. To substantiate this argument, the next two sections introduce the complexities involved in defining 'state fragility' and describe the institutional framework of the EU. Subsequently the way the main EU bodies understand 'state fragility' is analysed and explained. The final section concludes.

Defining the concept, causes and consequences of state fragility

Since the emergence of the term, scholars and practitioners alike have struggled to reach a consensus on how 'state fragility' should be conceptualised (for details on this process, see Nay in this issue). To first define what is meant by a 'functioning state', scholars in the institutionalist tradition refer to the Weberian notion of a state as a hierarchical structure of authoritative decision making that enjoys external and internal sovereignty. Weber characterised the state as 'a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.¹¹ In his view the continued existence of modern Western states is dependent on the constant progression of their bureaucratic foundations over time. Consequently, Weber saw administration and the provision of security as the benchmarks by which states can be judged (see Lemay-Hebert and Mathieu in this issue). From this perspective, security is the central criterion of state strength. Other criteria have been added by various authors to further refine the description of the state's capability to organise society. According to Fabra Mata and Ziaja, what most of these definitions have in common is that they include one or more central attributes of the state, such as: (1) effectiveness (how well state functions necessary for the security and well-being of citizens are performed); (2) authority (understood as the enforcement of a monopoly on the legitimate use of force); and (3) legitimacy (public, non-coercive acceptance of the state).¹² In a subsequent analytical step these criteria can be used to identify a state's malfunctions and to classify it on a continuum between the poles of 'consolidated' and 'failed', with 'fragile' falling somewhere in the middle (the thresholds for classification are subject to contention).¹³

Critical scholars have begun to challenge the analytical validity of the 'fragile state' concept as defined above, as well as the underlying state concept.¹⁴ Hagmann and Hoehne, Nuruzzaman, and Nay suggest that using the Weberian notion of a state may imply transferring a basically 'Western' understanding of 'statehood' to parts of the world in which different understandings of how communities organise themselves prevail. Scholars argue that this conceptual vagueness does not help policy makers create efficient tools to overcome fragility;¹⁵ in a worst-case scenario it might even allow powerful countries to deprive certain states of the privileges of sovereignty, opening the door to interventions by the West.¹⁶

Not only are the criteria for what constitutes a 'fragile state' disputed, so too are the causes of state fragility. Scholars disagree over whether state fragility is (1) the result of internal malfunctions;¹⁷ (2) the result of the structure of the global political economy and fragile states' position in this economy;¹⁸ or (3) the result of external interference and various transnational forces.¹⁹ With respect to identifying the consequences of state fragility, scholars have primarily assumed its effects on development and security to be negative (although more research is needed to substantiate these claims). Where development is concerned, state fragility is considered to be at the core of many internal and regional development problems, such as the failure to reduce poverty, to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals (see, for example, the self-description of the g7+, a recently founded group of states calling themselves 'fragile'²⁰) or to comply with the goals of foreign aid donors. Where security is concerned, it is often

claimed that fragile states are an ideal breeding ground for domestic and international terrorism, organised crime (eg human and drug trafficking), violent conflict and regional instability, emphasising the potential threats to a fragile state's neighbours and the wider global community.²¹

The EU, security, development and 'state fragility'

How might the EU be expected to define 'state fragility'?

Given that it is an organisation consisting of sovereign nation-states, one might expect that the EU, like many other governmental donors, would apply the Weberian concept of 'statehood' explored above to differentiate 'consolidated' states from 'fragile' states. Categories such as effectiveness, authority and legitimacy would thus somehow be reflected in EU documents describing the phenomenon. With regard to the causes of fragility, it is likely that the EU would subscribe to explanations that view state fragility as the result of the internal malfunctions of a state, as such an organisation would scarcely be likely to call into question its own contribution to the structure of the global political economy, nor would it blame itself for the negative impacts of its external interventions in sovereign states. Instead, a more diplomatic approach should be observable. With respect to the consequences of fragility, it is more difficult to develop a hypothesis about which approach the EU will follow. Recent research has revealed the emergence of a so-called 'security–development nexus', as well as a 'whole-of-government approach', in the Union's external relations. Especially since 9/11 the Union has sought to integrate development aspects into security policy and security aspects into development assistance, efforts that are likely to also influence the Union's notion of 'state fragility'.²²

How can the development of the EU's concept of 'state fragility' be explained?

In order to explain EU policy making, it should be noted that 'the EU' is not a singular actor.²³ The European Council (representing heads of states and governments), the European Parliament (representing European citizens), the Council of the European Union (representing the ministerial bureaucracies of the member states) and the European Commission (the EU's executive branch) all generally participate in EU policy making.²⁴

Depending on the topic, EU policy making may be driven by intergovernmental and/or supranational logics. Since its foundation the Union's foreign and security policies have been determined in an intergovernmental fashion, in which decisions are taken consensually by the member states.²⁵ The Union's development policy is a mix of intergovernmental approaches, whereby the EU coordinates the policies of its member states, and supranational approaches, in which the EU acts as an independent organisation (primarily through the Commission), taking the interests of the three main EU bodies (Commission, Council and Parliament) into account.²⁶ Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the creation of the office of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (a sort of 'foreign minister' for the EU), together with the EEAS (the EU's new diplomatic service), has added an additional layer of institutional

complexity; these bodies are intended to coordinate and represent the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (including its external assistance instruments).²⁷ Complying with the demands to achieve policy coherence internally and to 'speak with one voice' externally would require supra-nationalising the EU's foreign and security policy (eg extending qualified majority voting on foreign and security policy issues). However, even after the Lisbon reforms, decisions on these issues have been taken consensually.²⁸ This means that basic decisions on war and peace are still taken unanimously by the member states via the Council), while the initiative for development policy lies with the Commission, and more recently also with the High Representative and the EEAS; national development policies exist in parallel.

This mixture of responsibilities and competences requires substantial efforts of coordination between EU bodies and with the member states, which should also influence the Union's notion of 'state fragility'. It is to be expected that the different EU bodies will be motivated by different policy goals. The positions of the Council are likely to be more security-oriented, whereas those taken by the Commission (DEVCO and ECHO) would be expected to be oriented towards development and humanitarian assistance; the positions of the Parliament would presumably reflect human rights and parliamentary independence.²⁹ According to Carbone, achieving policy coherence should be a fundamental concern, but will also represent a challenge for the EU, given its complex institutional framework.³⁰

The EU's internal struggle to achieve coherence on 'state fragility'

For over a decade now, the main EU bodies have produced a significant corpus of texts that encompass both security and development facets of state fragility. In 2001 the European Commission set the tone for the general EU framework in the areas of conflict, security and fragility, while leaving room for divergent conceptualisations in the other main EU bodies. Without specifically referring to 'state fragility', the Commission observed that the situation of countries in 'structural crisis' receiving aid from ECHO 'can be aggravated by weak, emerging or disintegrating state institutions'.³¹ In addition, in a 2003 Communication on governance, the Commission linked weak statehood to weak governance capacity, limited service delivery and the lack of commitment to good governance.³² In contrast, in its 2003 Security Strategy, the European Council defined 'fragility' as a consequence of bad governance, civil conflict and the easy availability of small arms, all of which can weaken state and social structures. Domestic and external security problems were perceived as the major consequences of fragility.³³ 'State failure', the most extreme form of weak governance, was listed third (after terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons) among the key threats to the Union.³⁴ At that time, the European Council was expressing ideas similar to those of the other two bodies, highlighting the lack of good governance as a key factor in underdevelopment and fragility.³⁵ However, it also placed emphasis on the circumstances of a country's citizens and the protection of citizens' rights – especially human, civil and gender rights – in fragile states (without offering a definition),³⁶ as well as the rights of people to decide independently and democratically how to overcome poverty and fragility.³⁷

The differences between these main EU bodies apply not only to the specific concept of ‘state fragility’, but also to the EU development approach in general. As recently as December 2005, with the ‘European Consensus on Development’, the EU bodies outlined for the first time a shared vision intended to guide the Union’s policies and activities in the field of development.³⁸ With regard to managing and overcoming state fragility, the Council, Commission and Parliament jointly declare in this document that:

the EU will improve its response to difficult partnerships and fragile states, where a third of the world’s poor live. The EU will strengthen its efforts in conflict prevention work and will support the prevention of state fragility through governance reforms, rule of law, anti-corruption measures and the building of viable state institutions in order to help them fulfil a range of basic functions and meet the needs of their citizens. The EU will work through state systems and strategies, where possible, to increase capacity in fragile states. The EU advocates remaining engaged, even in the most difficult situations, to prevent the emergence of failed states.³⁹

The focus of this approach is clearly on top-down institution- and capacity building, as well as on crisis prevention. However, this statement should be considered in context. Among the common principles explored in Chapter 4 of the document, ‘state fragility’ ranks only fifth, after – in the EU’s interpretation – more urgent problems such as ‘ownership/partnership’ (Chapter 4.1), ‘in-depth political dialogue’ (Chapter 4.2), ‘participation of civil society’ (Chapter 4.3) and ‘gender equality’ (Chapter 4.4). Furthermore, the Commission, Council and Parliament promise to develop an early warning system and to support democratic governance and institutional capacity building in fragile countries. The bodies also recognise the necessity of implementing the OECD’s ‘Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations’.⁴⁰ As a major policy goal – using the same wording proposed by the OECD – they seek ‘to increase ownership and continue to build legitimate, effective and resilient state institutions and an active and organised civil society, in partnership with the country concerned’.⁴¹ In line with the OECD principles, the 2007 document expresses the ambition to better coordinate and more flexibly use EU instruments, while indicating the need to harmonise the interventions of EU member states in fragile states.

Since the 2005 Consensus the EU bodies have placed special emphasis on the improvement of governance quality, institution- and capacity building in ‘situations of fragility’ or ‘fragile states’, as stated in several documents that express support for the Consensus.⁴²

In 2006, the EU adopted a new approach to governance with a specific initiative implemented within the framework of the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) programming for the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states. This approach is based on dialogue and incentives, rather than on sanctions and conditionality. The Governance Action Plans (GAPS), including the commitments of ACP partners to improve governance, are linked to Country Strategy Papers. The GAPS constitute a guarantee of mutual commitment that forms the basis for ongoing political dialogue with partner countries on governance reforms.⁴³ Here, the EU bodies follow the contractual approach of the

World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, a similarly cooperative approach based on mutual agreement and partnership instead of threats and negative rewards.

In response to a peer-reviewed report of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2007, which criticised the Commission for not possessing a 'specific policy document to guide a Community approach to conflict and fragile states programming',⁴⁴ in October 2007 the Commission adopted its Communication 'Towards an EU Response to Situations of Fragility – Engaging in Difficult Environments for Sustainable Development, Stability and Peace'.⁴⁵ In this Communication, the Commission declares both 'the notion and the terminology' to be 'important to frame the debate on fragility'. However, it also demonstrates its awareness of the concerns of partner countries that 'tend to perceive the term "fragile states" as a "stigma" and, potentially, as a new form of conditionality, which may involve more or less formal "sanctions/suspension of cooperation"'.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Commission criticises the term 'fragile state' as 'donor-driven' rather than 'partnership-driven'.⁴⁷ To overcome this obstacle, the Commission proposes avoiding any reference to 'states' from the outset. Instead, and in line with OECD principles, it states a preference 'to focus on preventing and addressing effectively structural or contingent "situations" of fragility, which expose a country, a region within a country or even a particular community, to excessive strains and threats'.⁴⁸ The Communication asserts that the EU must remain engaged, even in the most difficult situations in which 'the social contract is broken' as a result of a 'state's incapacity or unwillingness to deal with its basic functions, obligations and responsibilities'.⁴⁹ The basic strategic approach outlined in the Communication does not propose any new instrument; rather, it encourages the EU bodies and the member states to take better advantage of the many policy frameworks and tools already at their disposal, and to ensure that these instruments are used in a 'holistic, coordinated, complementary and coherent manner'.⁵⁰

The Commission's Communication was welcomed by the follow-up 'Conclusions of the Council' and a resolution by the European Parliament in the same year.⁵¹ However, the promise of a coherent approach to overcoming situations of fragility was not realised: the 2007 Communication has never been given final approval by the Council, nor has an action plan been enacted.⁵² The various EU bodies have pursued different preferences, a fact that became apparent in their first responses to the Commission's initiative. The Council of the European Union highlighted the problem of the lack of political legitimacy resulting from weak governance and limited service delivery.⁵³ Although it generally adheres to the World Bank's classification of 'fragile states',⁵⁴ the Parliament noted in its response that 'state fragility is more an empirical concept than a normative one' and that 'the responsibility for determining when states are no longer "fragile" should be that of their citizens'.⁵⁵ Thus, the Parliament has refused to agree to a precise definition of 'state fragility', instead leaving it to the citizens affected by fragility to describe the situations in which they live.

The Lisbon Treaty, which laid the groundwork for joint external action, entered into force on 1 December 2009, raising expectations with regard to the enhancement of EU policy coherence in external affairs. The EEAS was created and included a specific division for Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding, and

Mediation Instruments. At the same time, DEVCO established a Unit for Fragility and Crisis Management.⁵⁶ This institutional strengthening on the topic can be seen as a new push for increased awareness within the EU of fragility issues and for further efforts to improve coherence in development policy. However, whether this will eventually include a new conceptualisation and a more refined understanding of ‘state fragility’ remains to be seen.

At the time of writing, the EU bodies are about to negotiate the new aid budget for the period 2014–20, additionally clarifying the division of competences among the bodies involved.⁵⁷ In its draft proposal for a new Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the Commission highlights the need to focus on the ‘[strengthening of] the rule of law and governance’ in ‘crises, post-crisis and fragility situations’, a topic that was somewhat neglected in the programming of the previous DCI.⁵⁸ The Commission seeks to ensure ‘flexible mechanisms to facilitate a more effective EU response to rapidly evolving situations in crisis, post-crisis and fragile states’.⁵⁹ In this way the Commission is also motivated by developments at the international level, especially the International Dialogue on Peace- and Statebuilding established in 2008.⁶⁰ This International Dialogue seeks to ‘bring together countries affected by conflict and fragility and their international partners to identify, agree and realise more effective ways of supporting transitions out of fragility and building peaceful states’.⁶¹ In response to these processes, in 2011, the Council adopted an ‘Operational Framework on Aid Effectiveness’, reaffirming the agreements under the Paris Declaration, and the EU Guidelines for the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), again highlighting the need for more effective aid spending and better coordination among EU bodies and Member States.⁶²

Analysing and explaining the EU’s concept of state fragility

How does the EU define ‘state fragility’?

In the documents presented and analysed above tentative descriptions rather than clear-cut definitions of ‘state fragility’ are found. Except in the 2007 Commission Communication no in-depth discussion of the concept of ‘fragility’ or ‘fragile state’ is provided. However, it can be determined that all EU bodies more or less explicitly adhere to the Weberian notion of ‘statehood’, understanding ‘state fragility’ as the result of internal malfunctions (such as governance deficits and limited service delivery) that call into question the authority and legitimacy of the state. But in further descriptions of the phenomenon, the causes and consequences of ‘state fragility’ are often intermixed: following DEVCO’s lead, the Commission frequently highlights development issues and emphasises the lack of good governance and service delivery as obstacles to sustainable development. The Council focuses on the security concerns resulting from state failure, where such failure triggers regional instability or threatens international and EU security. The Parliament instead emphasises citizens’ perceptions as a marker for ‘state fragility’ and the need for state building, while the EEAS places emphasis on crisis prevention and mediation.

The question of how and where to identify fragility remains unanswered. In contrast to other aid donors (such as the World Bank, USAID and the OECD),⁶³ the EU still does not employ an assessment or measurement tool to clearly identify

and rank cases of fragility. It relies instead upon publically available fragility and development indices, such as those published by the United Nations, the World Bank and the OECD – even though, as a DEVCO official indicates, the organisation is aware of the deficiencies in these databases, as ‘all indices are flawed in many ways’ (interviewee 2). Other than blatantly obvious cases of state failure in Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, and Afghanistan, the EU bodies do not name countries that might qualify as ‘weak’ or ‘fragile’ in official documents, nor does any of the EU bodies publish a list of such countries.⁶⁴ Research on the EU for this paper confirms what Cahill stated in 2007: ‘Labeling a state as “weak” or “failed” can be a politically sensitive subject so most governments keep this list private in order to not offend potential partners’.⁶⁵ All interviewees highlighted how the EU took care to avoid stigmatising potential partners as ‘weak’ or ‘fragile’ in its attempt to enhance equal partnerships ‘at eye level’.⁶⁶ However, they also indicated that the EU sets clear country priorities internally.⁶⁷ In the interviews, the state disintegration of Sudan and South Sudan and the conflict-ridden situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) were mentioned several times as important cases of fragility that deserved EU attention.

In summary, despite its obvious interest in circumventing the use of the term ‘fragility’ in order to avoid offending potential partners, the EU cannot completely avoid describing situations in which it is not satisfied with the quality of governance, the capacity to deliver services or with regional or international security. In fact, in the words of a DEVCO official, the term ‘state fragility’ is ‘a euphemism for “poor performer”’.⁶⁸ However this phenomenon may be labelled, there remains a need to identify poor performance in governance and security issues in order to facilitate the development of ‘context-sensitive approaches’ to resolve these problems.⁶⁹ The newest draft regulations for the 2014–20 budget seem to heed this observation and seek greater flexibility. However, the concept of ‘fragility’ has become even more vague: under the proposal any type of domestic crisis would be subsumed under a new category for states in ‘crisis, post-crisis and fragile situation’,⁷⁰ regardless of the conflict’s root causes or the current political, social and economic status of the country.

How can the lack of a clear concept of ‘state fragility’ be explained?

As elaborated above, EU policy making on ‘state fragility’ suffers – like all EU foreign and security policies – from the idiosyncrasies of the EU’s internal decision making and the challenging process of continuous institutional reform. The failure to adopt the 2007 Commission Communication on state fragility is a striking example of the competing logics of supranational (led by the Commission for development issues) and intergovernmental (led by the Council for security issues) policy making. The outcome of this clash of logics depends heavily on the internal coordination processes that attempt to reach a consensus between the various EU bodies and the member states, here with regard to a commonly shared understanding of ‘fragility’ and the adequate responses to it.

Additionally, the EU’s conception and treatment of fragility are affected by events and developments at the international level, including the post-9/11 discourse on security and the war on terror, the Millennium Development Goals and the International Dialogue on Peace- and Statebuilding. As a major aid donor the EU would like to influence the development of globally shared

policy-positions concerning fragile states, even though it often struggles to catch up with and align itself to the process because of the lack of policy coherence analysed above. None of the EU documents responding to international high-level meetings on aid (and aid effectiveness) or the International Dialogue on Peace- and Statebuilding offers anything new or innovative, nor do any display the ‘added value’ of the EU as an independent aid donor with special expertise in the fields of governance, democracy and human rights. Instead of taking advantage of its financial and moral power in an outward-directed communication, the documents read more like internal communications to EU bodies and member states, a vivid reminder of the EU’s need for coordination to enable it more powerfully to influence agenda setting and the formulation and implementation of aid policies. This observation was clearly confirmed by all interviewees.

However, this is not yet the full story. Although it has often been criticised for its technocratic approach, the EU attempts to respect country-specific developments, giving consideration to the concerns and needs of aid-recipient countries. In four cases (Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the CAR⁷¹), an inspection of EU country assessment and strategy papers, reports, Council resolutions and joint resolutions of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament reveals a very tentative and diplomatic assessment of the situation, generally circumventing the labels of ‘fragility’ or ‘failure’. The documents indicate that the Union’s approach to these country partners is characterised by an effort to harmonise a variety of competing objectives: first, the objective to mainstream the EU’s external relations in order to develop more generally applicable approaches towards partners in different regions of the world; second, the attempt to increase flexibility towards ‘states in fragile, crisis and post-crisis, including conflict affected, situations’⁷² by using a country-sensitive approach; third, the desire to avoid offending potential partners by labelling them ‘fragile’.

In the selected documents, all EU bodies demonstrate a preference for language describing ‘threats’ to human security or ‘challenges’ for development over ‘state fragility’ and ‘state failure’. When used, the terms ‘fragile’ or ‘weak’ qualify only a limited governance capacity at the national level or in specific parts of the country.⁷³ At times the terms are used to characterise specific temporal situations of ‘weakness’, such as a situation involving a ‘fragile economy’, ‘fragile security’ or ‘regional instability’.⁷⁴ When the terms appear in the documents, the EU immediately emphasises that the situations are not permanent; rather, they can be improved through a cooperative approach supporting the incumbent government. As a partner in the contract, the incumbent government should ‘own’ the process.⁷⁵ In fact, the documents generally employ neutral language in describing poor-performing countries with a history of conflict.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here of the official publications, documents, conclusions, communications and strategy papers of EU bodies, as well as the interviews conducted with EU officials and experts, allow three conclusions concerning the Union’s notion of ‘state fragility’. First, EU bodies still have trouble agreeing

on a definition of the phenomenon, even though the problem of ‘state fragility’ was identified in 2003 as a major challenge for EU security. The 2007 Communication by the Commission was the first document to explicitly conceptualise the EU’s specific understanding of ‘state fragility’, revealing the Union’s awareness of the needs and concerns of partner countries. However, this Communication has never been adopted, depriving the Union’s notion of ‘state fragility’ of conceptual clarity. Second, the internal lack of coherence between EU bodies and between the EU and its member states, as well as the ongoing process of institutional reform, make it difficult for the EU to define a consistent position on state fragility; however, developments in the international aid community also require EU policy adoption – a challenging prospect, given that external coherence is unlikely to be achieved without internal coherence. Third, EU external communications are motivated by a desire to respect the integrity of their country partners; specifically they seek to avoid stigmatising them as ‘fragile’. Whether this is a wise strategy is a matter of debate. No government would want to be devalued by such a label; however, without clearly stating the problems, it is impossible to develop meaningful and sustainable country-sensitive strategies to overcome deficits in governance, socioeconomic development and security.

If the EU is serious in its belief that that a lack of governance capacity is a key factor underlying ‘fragility’, it cannot continue to uphold its preference for top-down contractual approaches to state building, since the executive bodies that are accused of shortcomings are also the partners in the state-building contracts. These malfunctioning bodies are unlikely to be able to overcome the ‘situations of fragility’ that emerge as a result of governance and capacity deficits. No solution to this dilemma has yet been proposed.

A great deal remains to be done. In particular, the EU should take advantage of the knowledge available from both internal and external sources. It needs to more precisely define the term ‘fragility’ in order to better assess the root causes of the phenomenon, define the goals of support and set achievable benchmarks for partner countries, while maintaining its goals regarding flexibility. Furthermore, it should clarify the added value resulting from EU development cooperation. These steps could enable the EU to translate its financial power into political influence, allowing it to assume a role as a leading donor in fragile contexts.

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Notes

1. Stern and Öjendal, “Mapping the Security Development Nexus”; and Chandler, “The Security Development Nexus.”
2. Fabra Mata and Ziaja, *User’s Guide*; and Ziaja, “What do Fragility Indices Measure?”
3. Engberg-Pedersen et al., “Fragile Situations,” 23.
4. European Commission, “Annual Report 2012,” 25.
5. Grimm, “Zur Wirksamkeit Europäischer Entwicklungspolitik,” 382.
6. Amichai et al., eds, *Promoting Democracy*; Kotzian et al., “Instruments”; and Manners, “Normative Power Europe Reconsidered.”
7. European Commission, “Increasing the Impact of EU Development Policy,” 4.
8. See also the European Union’s self-description. Accessed August 1, 2013. http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/ensure-aid-effectiveness/busan_en.htm.
9. Hout, “Between Development and Security.”
10. The aim of the interviews was to obtain knowledge about how EU officials define and use the term ‘state fragility’. The relative openness of the interviews allowed the identification of the priorities set by EU officials, as well as revealing the concerns EU officials had regarding EU policy making towards fragile states. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Information stemming from these interviews is cited by numbering the interviewees according to the chronological order of their interviews.
11. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 78.
12. Fabra Mata and Ziaja, *User’s Guide*, 6.
13. François and Sud, “Promoting Stability,” 143.
14. Call, “Beyond the ‘Failed State’”; Putzel, “Why Development Actors Need a Better Definition”; Hagmann and Hoehne, “Failures of the State Failure Debate”; and Niemann, “War Making and State Making.”
15. Hagmann and Hoehne, “Failures of the State Failure Debate,” 45; Nuruzzaman, “Revisiting the Category of Fragile and Failed States”; and Nay, “Fragile and Failed States.”
16. Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 64; and Boas and Jennings, “Failed States and State Failure,” 475–485.
17. Rotberg, *When States Fail*; Cahill, “Donor Engagement in Fragile States”; and Fabra Mata and Ziaja, *User’s Guide*.
18. Engberg-Pedersen et al., “Fragile Situations,” 11; and Clapham, “The Challenge to the State.”
19. Hagmann and Hoehne, “Failures of the State Failure Debate,” 45; and Nuruzzaman, “Revisiting the Category of Fragile and Failed States.”
20. g7+ Secretariat, “Introducing the g7+.”
21. Iqbal and Starr, “Bad Neighbours”; and Patrick, “Weak States and Global Threats.”
22. Youngs, “Fusing Security and Development”; Bagoyoko and Gibert, “The Linkage between Security, Government and Development”; and Zwolski, “The EU and a Holistic Security Approach.”
23. For an overview, see Risse-Kappen, “Exploring the Nature of the Beast.”
24. For further details, see Hix and Høyland, *The Political System of the European Union*; and Carbone, “Mission Impossible.”
25. Risse, “Identity Matters,” 89.
26. Grimm, “Zur Wirksamkeit Europäischer Entwicklungspolitik,” 382. It should also be noted that development cooperation is just one foreign policy field among many, and it is generally regarded as less important than trade, agriculture and security policy. See Grimm and Leininger, “Not All Good Things Go Together.”
27. Zwolski, “The EU and a Holistic Security Approach.”
28. The Lisbon Treaty on European Union offers the option of ‘permanent structured co-operation’ (Article 42(6)), allowing nine or more member states to press ahead on an EU project.
29. Bagoyoko and Gibert, “The Linkage between Security, Government and Development,” 791–794.
30. Carbone, “Mission Impossible.”
31. European Commission, “Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention,” 8.
32. European Commission, “Governance and Development,” para. 72.
33. Council of the European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World*, 6.

34. Ibid., 4.
35. European Parliament, "Resolution as of 17 November 2005," paras 8–9.
36. Ibid., paras 9, 11.
37. Ibid., para. 28.
38. European Commission, "Room Document," 1; Council of the European Union et al., "The European Consensus on Development"; Council of the European Union, "Governance on the European Consensus for Development"; and European Parliament, "Resolution as of 17 November 2005."
39. Council of the European Union et al., "The European Consensus on Development," para. 20.
40. The OECD 'Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations' were originally drafted in January 2005. They were finally endorsed at an OECD-DAC high-level meeting in 2007. Council of the European Union et al., "The European Consensus on Development," para. 89.
41. Ibid., para. 90; and OECD, *Principles for Good International Engagement*.
42. For example, Council of the European Union, "Governance on the European Consensus for Development," para. 21.
43. European Commission, "Room Document," 4.
44. OECD-DAC, "European Union," 66.
45. European Commission, "Towards an EU Response to Situations of Fragility."
46. European Commission, "EU Response to Situations of Fragility in Developing Countries," 3.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. European Commission, "Room Document," 2–3.
50. Ibid.
51. Council of the European Union, "Security and Development"; and European Parliament, "Resolution of 15 November."
52. Interviewee 2; and European Commission, "Increasing the Impact of EU Development Policy," 6.
53. European Commission, "Towards an EU Response to Situations of Fragility," 8.
54. European Parliament, "Resolution of 15 November 2007," para. A.
55. Ibid., para. B.
56. Interviewees 3 and 4.
57. This process is being guided by European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, "Global Europe", and by several draft proposals provided by the Commission for the reorganisation of development financing instruments: "Preparation of the Multiannual Financial Framework"; "Proposal for a 'Regulation of the European Parliament'" (PREP, Com(2011) 840 Final; PREP, Com(2011) 842 Final; and PREP, Com(2011) 845 Final.
58. European Commission, PREP, Com(2011) 840 Final, 4.
59. Ibid., 5.
60. OECD, "International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding," 1.
61. Ibid.
62. Council of the European Union, "Operational Framework on Aid Effectiveness"; OECD, *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*; and European Commission, "Preparation of the Multiannual Financial Framework," 7.
63. For an overview, see Ziaja, "What do Fragility Indices Measure?"; and Nay, and Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu in this issue.
64. Interviewees 2, 3 and 4.
65. Cahill, "Donor Engagement in Fragile States," 10.
66. Interviewees 2 and 3.
67. Interviewees 2, 3 and 4.
68. Interviewee 2.
69. Interviewee 2. Similar opinions were expressed by interviewees 3 and 4.
70. European Commission, PREP, Com(2011) 840 Final, art. 12.
71. Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan, and the DRC are singled out, because they appear on most donor lists as obvious cases of fragility. Thus, as a donor, the EU would be unable to avoid being confronted by the causes and consequences of 'state fragility' or even state failure. The CAR is included because all interviewees indicated the EU's special interest in this country.
72. European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Global Europe," 8.
73. Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on Sudan and South Sudan," 3; and European Commission, *Country Strategy Paper*, 33.
74. Republic of Sudan and European Community, *Strategy Paper*, 9; République Centrafricaine and Communauté européenne, *Stratégie de Coopération*, 6, 8; and European Commission, *Country Strategy Paper*, 7. In the 2008–13 programme the CAR is described as a 'fragile post-conflict country close to implosion due to its decades long structural crisis'. République Centrafricaine and Communauté européenne, *Document de Stratégie*, 8. The integrative strategy is described as a response for a country 'in the category "fragile"'. Ibid., 30.
75. See, for example, République Centrafricaine and Communauté européenne, *Document de Stratégie*, 30.

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