

Research Project

From Fragility to Resilience: Accounting for the Diversity of State-making Trajectories in Africa

Third-party funded project

Project title From Fragility to Resilience: Accounting for the Diversity of State-making Trajectories in Africa

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State fragility has come to lay at the heart of the international community's engagement in developing countries. This is evidenced by the concept's centrality in the OECD's Development Assistance Committee's agenda, and its inclusion in the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report as well as the Swiss government's 2013-2016 Message on International Cooperation. While policymakers have frequently linked fragility to a range of humanitarian concerns and transnational security threats (cf. McLoughlin 2012), research organizations such as The Fund for Peace have developed indexes that provide a gloomy outlook on the state(s) of the world. This applies particularly to Africa, which is summarily judged to be "undoubtedly plagued by systematic state failure" (Howard 2014), and which is allegedly home to 30 out of a total of 49 fragile states in the world (OECD 2015).

However, Burkina Faso's huge successes towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Tanzania's notable political stability, Botswana's stunning economic progress, Zambia's completely peaceful development, and the fact that out of 54 African countries more than half have neither experienced internal nor intrastate war between 1947 and 2015 (UCDP/PRIO 2015; see also Lindemann 2008), all call such blanket propositions on 'the African state' into question. Thus, and given that the alleged structural causes of fragility—ranging from arbitrary colonial borders (Herbst 2000) to widespread poverty and inequality (Sachs 2003)—are widely shared among African countries, the real puzzle is not necessarily why so many countries have succumbed to fragility, but why numerous African states have *not*. Framed differently, the central question motivating this research project is how differences in state trajectories in Africa can be explained, and under what conditions it is state-making or state-breaking that prevails.

The project hypothesizes that a defining characteristic of state trajectories lies in the process of 'rule standardization'. It proposes that whereas states of fragility are marked by a plurality of coexisting institutions (i.e. 'rules of the game') and identities (i.e. 'rules of the mind'), resilient states have witnessed a process whereby such rules came to be standardized across a politically defined territory and its population. While this novel analytical lens provides the project's originality, its rationale lies in gaining a more nuanced understanding of state-making and its underlying currents. Informed by historical sociology and political economy, and framed in the language of institutions, this research advances theoretical and empirical insights into state dynamics, not least by bringing issues of social cohesion and identity formation back into debates on state-making.

Unlike many past studies of fragility, which have generally treated cases of fragile statehood in isolation and exhibited insufficient variation on the dependent variable, this project avoids such methodological flaws by proposing a comparative case studies research design. Accordingly, a few carefully selected pairs of African countries that are marked by divergent state trajectories will be subject to in-depth research and comparative analysis—both within and across pairs. This not only promises to provide a better understanding of why and under what conditions fragile statehood does (not) occur, but also allows to rethink processes of state-making and -breaking more generally.

Keywords state fragility; state-building; nation-building; sub-Saharan Africa

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