

Fragility: Dimensions and classifications



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Author: Dr Léonie Jana Wagner

Editor: Dr Julia Sattelberger

Despite the fact that fragile statehood has become a central issue in international cooperation especially in the last ten years, a uniform definition of fragility does not exist.

Important dimensions of fragility

However, most experts would agree that fragile countries are characterised by serious deficiencies in at least one of the following three dimensions:

- **Capacity:** The state lacks the capability to provide basic public services
- **Legitimacy:** The state is not perceived as legitimate by its population
- **Authority:** The state has no monopoly on the use of force in its territory

Important classifications (country lists) of fragile states

In international cooperation, the following three classifications of fragile states have generally prevailed:

- The **World Bank list** ("*harmonised list of fragile situations*") mainly highlights the capacity dimension. This list is compiled based on an evaluation of the political and institutional structure of a country against various criteria (*Country Policy and Institutional Assessment*). The individual evaluations are aggregated to arrive at an index value. A country is considered "fragile" if the index value exceeds a specific threshold value (currently: 3.2) or if the country was the destination of a "*peacekeeping*" or "*peacebuilding*" mission of the UN or a regional organisation in the last three years. The list included 35 countries or state-like entities in 2015.
- The **Fragile States Index of Fund for Peace** (FFP), a US-American non-governmental organisation, ranks the status of a country using over 100 social, economic, political and military indicators that are grouped into 12 categories (uneven economic development, legitimacy, human rights, basic services, security,

etc.). Each of the 12 categories is weighted equally to form an index. In 2016, 38 countries were classified as "very fragile" (threshold value: >90).

- In the past, the **OECD fragile states list** only comprised the World Bank and FFP country lists. Recently, however, the OECD presented its own multidimensional definition of fragility. According to that, fragility is understood as a situation that can potentially affect all countries ("*from fragile states to states of fragility*"). It analyses political, social, economic, environmental and societal risks which could also, however, be mitigated again through capacities to adapt ("*resilience*") in these five areas. A complex statistical method is then used to identify the constellations that are especially critical. Using this process, the OECD identified 56 fragile contexts including middle-income countries with a high level of crime-related violence (e.g. Venezuela) or apparently stable regimes that lack sufficient legitimacy (e.g. North Korea). The same holds true for states that are relatively stable in economic terms (e.g. Timor-Leste) or are even experiencing an economic upswing (e.g. Angola).

Differences and similarities

The country classifications outlined consider different (sub-)dimensions of fragility. They use different sources of information and differently weighted indicators, using different sub-categories to arrive to overall evaluations, which rely on different threshold values for dividing countries in fragility classes. It is therefore not surprising that the results vary considerably. Since the OECD uses the broadest definition of fragility, its list of fragile countries is also the most comprehensive (see graphic). What is striking is that only a relatively small group of countries is considered "fragile" according to all three definitions.

This underscores the fact that the three country classifications focus on different aspects. Which of the three classifications is "better" depends primarily on what the intended purpose is. None of the three definitions is really suitable for the formulation of development strategies to reduce fragility – for this purpose, the level of the disaggregated indicators that are used for the calculations seems to be more helpful instead. ■

