

Review – 'Fragile States' in an Unequal World

Written by Babatunde Obamamoye

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BABATUNDE OBAMAMOYE, JUL 23 2023

'Fragile States' in an Unequal World: The Role of the g7+ in International Diplomacy and Development Cooperation

By Isabel Rocha de Siqueira
Open Book Publishers, 2022

Only a few issues, if any, have gained more traction in contemporary development debates than the concept of 'fragile states' and its centrality in the framing of international development assistance programmes. This phenomenon has prompted many pundits to reposition the idea of 'fragile states' and its (re)appropriation as subjects of scholarly analysis (see Grimm, Lemay-Hébert and Nay 2014). *'Fragile States' in an Unequal World* is an important book that is worth paying attention to. The book narrates the story of member states of, and people working with, the g7+, an international organisation of 20 conflict-affected, self-proclaimed fragile states that was founded in 2010. It innovatively deploys the power of storytelling to dissect how these people 'came to believe in politics and policy', 'how they feel about their work', 'how their family and communities relate to the work they do', and 'what they would love to see in the next generation' (p.8). The book equally highlights the key issues associated with the present international aid system, particularly from the purview of political actors in recipient communities. Some of the drawbacks identified in this regard include donors' inadequate understanding of the problems, allocation of development aid to the wrong priorities, absence of top-decision makers from donor states during negotiations, and the practice of reporting aid allocation success in the midst of its failure.

'Fragile States' in an Unequal World presents these analyses across five substantive parts. The first part unpacks how to find a voice in a diplomatic environment, especially for new entrants who may find the work daunting and challenging. It narrates the experiences of focal persons of the g7+ as 'accidental diplomats' (p.53) searching for a voice for fragile states in global development cooperation. The book charts how some of these individuals facilitated the creation of the g7+ in 2010, organised a UN side event on a New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States in 2012, pushed for Sustainable Development Goal 16, and secured UN observer status for the g7+ in 2019. The second part enunciates how to ensure survival amidst monitoring and evaluation within unequal development cooperation. It gives an account of how focal persons and leaders of the g7+ made use of strategic passion, solidarity, and seeing things through to engage the donor community, develop a new fragile assessment framework, facilitate fragile-to-fragile cooperation, and advance the course of the g7+. While the third part discusses how the leading figures in the g7+ work with passion, harness the efficacy of a concerted effort, humanise cooperation, and add flexibility to the rule of engagement. The fourth part explores how people in the g7+ take pride in their family background and how some g7+ member states drew on the efficacy of self-pride to reject hosting refugee camps for donors and secure regular interactive engagement with the leadership of the World Bank.

The final main part unearths how people working with the g7+ see what they do as a sense of duty for their countries and how it motivates them to be resilient in their commitment to the g7+ project. It equally narrates their new priorities regarding the future of the g7+ and the international development aid system. Overall, as Rocha de Siqueira points out, the book is about 'values, commitments, mistakes and challenges at a personal and collective level' and 'how the g7+ fights to have a collective voice' in this unequal international system (p.8, 11).

A major strength of the book is, perhaps, its departure from mainstream approaches by recasting the people in the

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recipient communities as subjects in the discourse of fragile states, international development assistance and the complex diplomatic interactions between donors and aid recipient countries. It gives an opening for a plurality of narratives in the analysis of state fragility and international development aid system where the voices, experiences, testimonies, and perspectives of g7+ member states and those working for the organisation are equally heard. Thus, it contributes to the emerging scholarship on how the so-called 'fragile states' actively (re)appropriate the label to advance their course on the international scene (see Fisher 2014; Pospisil 2017). By doing so, the book allows insights into the perspectives of political actors in aid-recipient communities on the key issues associated with the current global development assistance system. This, for instance, was reflected in the account of Xanana Gusmão, former Prime Minister of Timor-Leste, who noted that the dominant aid framework encourages donors 'to impose their supply-driven or template solutions with little regard for our culture, our context and the reality of our country' (p.90). In addition, the author's use of a sociological approach that relies on storytelling, songs, and poems while focusing on the people (of the g7+) is very innovative, fascinating, and helpful. This methodological approach allows the book to delve simultaneously into two important but complex subjects – that is, the issues of pivotal values (e.g., strategic passion, trust, listening, patience, mutual respect, etc.) and how people empirically deployed these values (to advance the course of the g7+). Thus, Rocha de Siqueira opines that 'going beyond the position in which you find yourself requires patience... [and] if patience is a must for anyone to survive, one requires the driving force of *strategy* in order to overcome passivity' (p.85).

This is not to argue that the book only has strengths without a single weakness. A weak point of the book is, perhaps, the imperfect match of its title with its main thrust. For instance, while the title is about 'the role of the g7+ in international diplomacy and development cooperation', its central theme mainly involves (the experiences and testimonies of) the people working with the g7+. Unsurprisingly, Rocha de Siqueira submits from the outset that this 'is a book about people' (p.8). Of course, the two subjects are related but not necessarily the same. Also, relatedly, it seems the author struggles to make a decision on what should be the central focus of the book. While Rocha de Siqueira states that it is about people and that 'Together, they [i.e., all parts of the book] tell us of how the g7+ fights to have a collective voice' (p.11), in my analysis, again, these two aims are not the same. Thus, while the book strikingly and unequivocally narrates the experiences, testimonies, upbringing, passion, and motivations of the people working with the g7+, the same is not the case when it comes to how the g7+ as a *distinct* international organisation activates its collective agency in the global discourse of aid assistance, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. It, therefore, diminishes its deliverable regarding what constitutes the actual role of the g7+ in international diplomacy of development cooperation.

Notwithstanding the above points, I have no doubt that '*Fragile States' in an Unequal World* gives a unique, fascinating, and thought-provoking account of the people in the g7+ community. It will be valuable for scholars, policymakers, development practitioners, and students of world politics who seek to know more about the experiences, testimonies, expectations and perspectives of political actors in conflict-affected states, especially concerning the creation of the g7+, the idea of fragile states, and the problems confronting the current international development assistance framework.

References

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