

# POLICYBRIEF

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## Measuring State Fragility: Challenges and Policy Implications

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### Background

Amidst a backdrop of escalating violence and armed conflicts across the globe, and a recognition that insecurity and conflict pose significant threats to global stability and development, a number of initiatives attempt to measure and monitor country fragility. Fragility is, however, a complex concept that is difficult to define and, therefore, to measure precisely. Ranking it may be an impossible or meaningless task. Despite the challenges, many producers of fragility indices continue to measure the concept or develop new methodologies in efforts to accurately capture meaningful aspects of fragility. The noise to signal ratio in this environment is high.

This policy brief offers insights into what fragility indices can ultimately tell us and suggests how policymakers can use them wisely.

### The Complexity of Measuring and Monitoring Fragile Countries

Governments can fail in many ways. They can be overthrown, challenged through internal rivalries, captured by internal elites, overtaken by neighbors, dissolved due to popular protest or simply left to decay, slowly, through inaction and mismanagement. Given the many different ways that states can fail, this complexity means that it is difficult to combine all aspects of fragility into a single measure. Nonetheless, many of the methodologies reviewed combine all indicators into a composite index that gives a snapshot of development across countries or monitors their trends over time. However, the aggregation of indicators can hide many complexities and theoretical assumptions.

For example, it is challenging to justify a theoretical foundation for the indicators ‘minimum provision of public goods’ and ‘adequate representation of population’ – indicators that almost all fragility indices measure. If countries have never had a history of providing public goods, citizen expectations of the provision of public goods may be quite low, suggesting the indicator would be irrelevant in some cases. What may appear as stability, ostensibly achieved through ‘adequate representation’ could be an indicator

of fragility where a small, disenfranchised minority is not represented. Important nuances of case context can be lost in aggregation or forgotten through standardization.

Table 1 below compares four different fragility indices. Highlighted in blue are countries that are identified by at least one of the other three indices as being one of the world’s top 10 most fragile countries and those marked in red borders rank in three or all four indices as falling into this same category. Besides the general overlap of countries, what is remarkable about this table is that it shows countries that are not on other lists of the top 20. Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Comoros, Djibouti, Iran, Liberia, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, North Korea, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Zimbabwe and a number of small island states give very different ideas of what fragility is depending on which list is being used. If there is really one definition of fragility, then at least three of these common methodologies are arguably erroneous.

#	Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI-WS), 2020	Fragile States Index (FSI), 2020	IDA Resource Allocation Index (CPIA), 2020	State Fragility Constellations (SFC), 2020
1	Somalia	Yemen	South Sudan	Afghanistan
2	Yemen	Somalia	Yemen	Azerbaijan
3	Eritrea	South Sudan	Eritrea	Central African Republic
4	Syria	Syria	Somalia	Libya
5	Sudan	Central African Republic	Sudan	Nigeria
6	North Korea	Chad	Guinea-Bissau	Somalia
7	South Sudan	Sudan	Central African Republic	South Sudan
8	Libya	Afghanistan	Marshall Islands	Syria
9	Turkmenistan	Zimbabwe	Afghanistan	Yemen
10	Iran	Burundi	Congo, Rep.	Burkina Faso
11	Equatorial Guinea	Cameroon	Haiti	Burundi
12	Chad	Haiti	Comoros	Cameroon
13	Congo, DR	Nigeria	Micronesia, Fed. Sts.	Chad
14	Afghanistan	Guinea	Chad	Congo, Rep.
15	Central African Republic	Mali	Papua New Guinea	Djibouti
16	Myanmar	Iraq	Tuvalu	Equatorial Guinea
17	Tajikistan	Eritrea	Timor-Leste	Eritrea
18	Congo, Rep.	Niger	Burundi	Eswatini
19	Burundi	Libya	Solomon Islands	Ethiopia
20	Eswatini	Ethiopia	Liberia	Iraq

Table 1. Country rankings according to different indices of state fragility  
Source: Compiled by authors

### Differentiating Between Signals and Noise of Fragility

In our [updated review](#) of fragility indices, we unpack the underlying features of the selected indices, systematically compare them, and find that not all indices are a source of useful information. Composite measures often draw on other data sources, which may themselves be composite indicators.

Double counting can result in unintentional weighting or indicators driven by data that are years old. As a result, some indices may consist of noise rather than actual signals of fragility.

Figure 1 below examines the components of fragility indices more closely and illustrates their data sources by five distinct types. The number of indicators for each index are listed in parentheses. The figure highlights the significant overlap of sourced information among indices, with only the last four indices (shown in the figure) using proprietary algorithms or methodologies, complicating our assessment of the indices’ reliance on other indicators. These proprietary algorithms or methodologies, often opaque, may themselves be sources of noise as they may be subjective or non-replicable. For example, the World Bank’s IDA/CPIA process is an internal staff assessment of countries that considers multiple dimensions. While it benefits from regional and global reviews within the Bank in order to create an internal IDA consistency, there is no guarantee that these same ratings and rankings would result from assessments by other experts at, say, the UN, or from each country assessment by international or local experts, even with the same methodology.

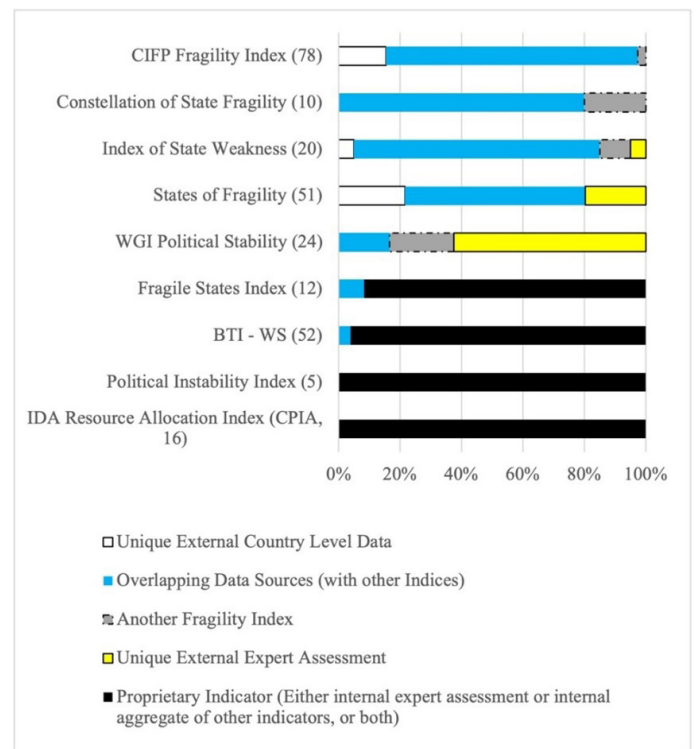


Figure 1. Mapping out the fragility indices and their most widely used data sources.

Source: Compiled by authors

The issue of time lag in the data is particularly pernicious. Indices of state fragility represent national level data that usually draw on slow-moving indicators. Any changes in these indicators are only observed over long time periods, meaning that the underlying components may not adequately reflect changes until years later. This is evident in the critique from developing countries of corruption measures such as the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. New governments that have been elected to combat corruption risk facing perceptions that still linger from years prior. Time lags can also result in noise when the indicators produced using one methodology are used in another index. If an indicator is measured one year by an expert assessment, based on data from the previous year, and the resultant indicator is used in another index the following year, the underlying data may be three or four years removed from the final “fragility” score. If an indicator is a composite of two indicators, one of which inadvertently draws on the same underlying data as the other, then additional, unintended weight can be placed on the underlying data in the final fragility score.

In the end, the identified problems of double-counting and time delay in indicators can compound and lead to fragility scores disconnected from reality. It raises an important question for informed users of indices as to what these component indicators are ultimately referring to and whether they capture meaningful information about fragility. However, these problems, while critical, do not invalidate the use of the underlying indicators. Below, we present some key takeaways and recommendations for the policy community from our review of the indices.

## Key Takeaways and Recommendations

### Reduce noise by going straight to the signal.

In order to reduce the noise of information and avoid the problems of double-counting or time delays in data, specific indicators may be more useful than composites or aggregations.

### Interrogate underlying assumptions.

Behind all measures of state fragility there is an underlying assumption, sometimes made explicit, about the ‘idea of a state’, which then defines the necessary characteristics of a state in selecting those underlying variables and imposes a normative assumption of what constitutes a change and how countries should therefore perform.

### Defining fragility at the level where it matters most, the fragile state.

Rather than implicitly adopt the idea of the state imposed by external indices, actors (national and international) interested in avoiding fragility could simply use all available indicators (without aggregating), collaborate and conduct a comprehensive assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the state environment, and, most importantly, what will be done to improve specific indicators. Such an exercise could be done using available indicators and aim to define national actors’ own idea of the optimal state and the necessary actions for improvement. Contextualizing the indicators of fragility countries can develop a deeper understanding of their own circumstances and challenges, fostering a sense of ownership and agency among national actors with the support of other stakeholders.

## REFERENCES

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