



Development effectiveness in fragile contexts

Evidence from an international research conference

by Rachel Gisselquist, Patricia Justino, and Andrea Vaccaro

FINDINGS

While there is much evidence that aid improves development outcomes, development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected states has a mixed record, which makes finding ways to improve development effectiveness particularly relevant for these cases

Operating in a manner consistent with the effectiveness principles is particularly difficult in contexts with weak or illegitimate government institutions, because the government might be unable or unwilling to respect these principles

Research suggests several ways that development cooperation can be improved on a case-by-case basis to meet the particular challenges of fragile and conflict-affected contexts

A critical challenge the international community faces is how to make development cooperation more effective in fragile and conflict-affected states. This objective is important for several reasons, not least of which is the recent estimate that, by 2030, the vast majority of the world's most poverty-affected people (86%) will live in fragile and conflict-affected states.

On 17–18 November 2022, the [International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation](#) was organized in Brussels, Belgium by UNU-WIDER and the European Commission (DG INTPA), under its capacity as the leading entity of the GPEDC's Action Area 1.1 on 'Demonstrating the impact of effectiveness'. Over 70 papers were presented at the conference, selected through an international call for papers from a pool of over 250 submissions. They provide a rich resource of evidence and analysis which aims to improve development cooperation, particularly in fragile contexts.

The mixed record of international aid in fragile contexts

The research suggests that development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected states has a mixed record at best. This stands in contrast to the findings from the broader literature on aid effectiveness, which points overall to a positive impact on development outcomes.¹

In one study of aid in highly fragile states, which draws on systematic reviews of evaluations of aid in Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan, researchers found little evidence of any positive impact. The paper concludes that aid is not an effective tool for encouraging stability and good governance in fragile contexts.² Another study, which draws lessons from more than two decades of research on aid effectiveness in fragile contexts, however, finds that aid does have a positive impact overall, although several of the most fragile contexts remain exceptions.³

The lesson of these findings is not that development cooperation should be abandoned in extremely fragile contexts—as the wrong strategy or as a waste of resources—but that meeting critical objectives is more difficult in more challenging settings.

The effectiveness principles in fragile contexts

Delivering aid in accordance with [the effectiveness principles](#)—country-owned, results-driven, inclusive, and transparent and mutually accountable—is especially challenging in fragile contexts with weak or illegitimate national state institutions.

FOOTNOTES:

1. This was a core finding of the UNU-WIDER 2011–14 'ReCom' research programme on foreign aid.

2. Zürcher, Christoph. 'The effectiveness of aid in fragile states. Results from a systematic review of aid evaluations in Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan, 2008–2021.' Forthcoming WIDER Working Paper.

3. Carment, David and Yagadeesen Samy. Aid Effectiveness in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Lessons from More than Two Decades of Research. Forthcoming WIDER Working Paper.

4. Hasselskog, Malin, Vedaste Ndizera and Joakim Öjendal. Connecting national ownership and local participation in aid recipient countries. The cases of Rwanda and Cambodia. Forthcoming WIDER Working Paper.

A study of development cooperation in both Cambodia and Rwanda is illustrative.⁴ In both cases, country ownership and local participation did not go hand-in-hand, which may be sometimes the case when state institutions lack sufficient legitimacy. Other case studies confirm that in fragile countries —such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and South Sudan— even if political elites commit in theory to the effectiveness agenda, the voice of local communities and the broader civil society may not be heard.

Opportunities to improve country ownership

There are no easy solutions, but in countries where national governments do not respect human rights it is useful to understand ownership ‘as something to be built, rather than something that already exists and just needs to be identified’.⁵ In some fragile countries, legitimacy may also be higher at the local level than at the national level. This was identified, for example, in studies of Somalia⁶ and Afghanistan.⁷ Hence, a bottom-up approach, in which ownership is understood as something to achieve more broadly than at the level of national state ownership, may be more successful.

When ownership encompasses local communities and their demands, it can have broader benefits, such as greater empowerment of civil society and marginalized communities, which can be helpful to improving outcomes overall. In a similar vein, a study of country ownership in six recipient countries —Bangladesh, El Salvador, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda— explores what refocusing attention from country ownership to ‘inclusive ownership’ would entail and suggests that the broader conceptualization may improve development cooperation.⁸

There are also synergies between the effectiveness agenda and efforts to build more effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions —one of the core aims of SDG16 to promote peace and inclusivity.

When establishing peace is an aim of development cooperation, programmes could look to objectives beyond



Photo: Joel Heard

ending large-scale armed conflict. Greater recognition of the much more prevalent forms of community tensions, low-level violence, and interpersonal violence can help.⁹

One important way forward is to revise and systematically analyse the effects of aid in conflict-affected contexts, not only in terms of development outcomes, but also in terms of establishing security and paving the way to social cohesion —key factors underlying improvements in development outcomes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving the effectiveness of development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected states is a crucial humanitarian and development priority given that the world’s poorest populations will concentrate in these contexts in less than a decade.

Clear-sighted recognition of the real tensions between the effectiveness principles and institutional realities in fragile contexts is essential to move forward the effectiveness agenda. Some effectiveness principles may be at odds with the political contexts of many fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Recognise that while delivering locally-owned, participative, and accountable assistance goes hand-in-hand with a larger impact, it can be in tension with national state ownership when state legitimacy is weak.

Look for opportunities to exploit synergies between the effectiveness agenda and efforts to support SDG 16 by promoting effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Explore greater emphasis on bottom-up approaches and broader concepts of ownership, such as ‘inclusive ownership’.

FOOTNOTES:

5. Brown, Stephen. *Effective Development Cooperation and Sexual and Gender Minorities*.
6. Cloutier, M., H. Hassan, D. Isser and G. Raballand (2022). ‘Understanding Somalia’s Social Contract And State-Building Efforts: Consequences For Donor Interventions’. [WIDER Working Paper 2022/123](#). Helsinki: UNU-WIDER.
7. Bizhan, Nematullah. *The politics and policies of aid-recipient countries and aid effectiveness*. Forthcoming WIDER Working Paper.
8. Bhattacharya, Debapriya, Towfiqul Islam Khan and Najeeba Mohammed Altaf. *Unpacking ‘Ownership’ in Development Cooperation Effectiveness: Perspectives of Southern Recipients*. Forthcoming WIDER Working Paper.
9. Anke Hoeffler. ‘Is aid effective in reducing violence?’. Keynote Address, The International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation, 17 November 2022.

This policy brief draws on the studies presented at the [International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation](#) on 17–18 November 2022, in Brussels, Belgium, jointly organized by UNU-WIDER and the European Commission (DG INTPA) under its capacity as the leading entity of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) Action Area 1.1 on ‘Demonstrating the impact of effectiveness’.

