

Rural Recovery in Fragile States: Agricultural support in countries emerging from conflict

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Despite on-going debates surrounding the usefulness of the term 'fragile states', there is general consensus that donors and aid actors must engage more effectively in such countries. This paper examines the question of how international aid actors might support the agricultural component of rural livelihoods in fragile states that are emerging from conflict.

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Policy conclusions

Based on investigations undertaken in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Southern Sudan, we recommend that:

- The objective of agricultural support in fragile states affected by conflict should not focus solely on increasing production but should also aim to enhance consumption, markets and livelihoods more broadly.
- The essence of agricultural support in countries emerging from conflict should be in facilitating the transition from supply-led programming to establishment of sustainable (market-driven) systems for service delivery.
- For this transition to take place, a fundamental shift must take place in the role of NGOs, massive capacity building efforts at all levels are required, and there must be clarity and consensus on the role of the state vis à vis private sector.
- Emphasis must also be placed on institution-building and on addressing vulnerability and social inequality through social protection and livelihood promotion.
- Interventions should be designed according to the broader political and security environment and based on an understanding of vulnerability that incorporates notions of powerlessness.

Fragile states and international aid

The term 'fragile states' is defined slightly differently by different agencies (Box 1) but generally refers to countries that are not able or willing to provide basic services to their citizens, particularly the poor. Other terms that have been used to describe fragile states include low income countries under stress (LICUS), countries at risk, difficult environments, difficult partnerships, failing states, and poor performers. Most definitions of fragile states are not limited to countries affected by conflict, but such countries form a significant sub-set of fragile states¹ and thus warrant particular attention, hence the focus

of this paper. Poverty is particularly widespread in fragile states, yet the delivery of international aid to address poverty is especially difficult because the institutions and policies within such states are so weak. Donors agree that it is essential to find ways to engage more effectively with fragile states, not only to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals but also to promote global security. Such engagement requires a coherent approach to supporting the goals of peace and security, respect for the rule of law, and human rights, as well as social and economic development.

The ways in which international aid is provided in fragile states — and particularly those emerging

Box 1: How are fragile states defined?

The World Bank identifies fragile states according to their country performance index. Fragility is defined in two respects: (i) weak policies and institutions make countries vulnerable in their capacity to deliver services to their citizens, to control corruption, or to provide for sufficient voice and accountability; and (ii) the risk of conflict and political instability (World Bank, 2005).

The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines difficult partnerships or fragile states as countries where there is a lack of political commitment and insufficient capacity to develop and implement pro-poor policies (DAC/CHAIR (2005)3).

The UK Department for International Development defines fragile states as those where the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor. The most important functions of the state for poverty reduction are territorial control, safety and security, capacity to manage public resources, delivery of basic services, and the ability to protect and support the ways in which the poorest people sustain themselves (DFID, 2005).

from conflict — must necessarily be context and case specific, but experience suggests that development interventions must be linked to broader peacebuilding aims through interventions that are sensitive to political and conflict dynamics. Service delivery should involve linking humanitarian assistance to longer-term development, and for this to be sustainable there must be a balance between state capacity building, support to civil society and the private sector. The focus of service delivery in fragile states tends to be on the delivery of essential services, i.e. health, water and sanitation, and education. But agriculture cannot be overlooked since it is often an important source of livelihood to rural populations and forms the basis of many food security interventions.

The elusive link between relief and development

Relief is essentially designed to save lives in the face of acute threats to health and subsistence, but the chronic nature of contemporary conflict means that conventional relief responses are often inadequate. Development assistance, on the other hand, is designed to address poverty and promote economic growth. Institutional breakdown, loss of human capital and increased levels of vulnerability present an enormous challenge in fragile states affected by conflict. Although recovery or rehabilitation are often regarded as processes that link relief and development, such a linkage is constrained by the differing objectives, mandates and operating rules of these two forms of assistance. Relief delivers aid outside the state structures of the host country and seeks to restore the pre-conflict status quo, whereas development aid seeks to change it through engaging with the state. Terms like rehabilitation, reconstruction, and recovery imply a return to a former supposedly stable and desirable state of affairs, but a return to the pre-conflict situation may merely recreate the conditions that led to war in the first place. In practice, the political imperative to achieve quick impacts (both by new governments as well as donors) may in some cases impede the development of sustainable institutions. A key challenge in such contexts is to strike an appropriate balance between meeting short-term needs and the long-term desire to reform. In relation to the agricultural sector, longer-term reforms might include changes in land tenure policies, rural governance structures, or relevant public sector institutions.

A critique of post-conflict agricultural programming
Seed aid and beyond

Interviews with agency staff responsible for rehabilitation programming indicate a widespread belief that the phasing out of food aid, through its replacement with seed aid, is a necessary step in the transition towards more developmental approaches to food security. Assessments of emergency seed aid interventions have shown that these often have little impact, prompting calls to move ‘beyond seeds and tools’. In Afghanistan, seed distributions have primarily been promoted as a way to push new varieties on ‘ignorant’ farmers. Yet this has taken place without the related extension activities, on-farm varietal trials and demonstrations that are required to allow farmers to learn about these new varieties or to ensure the accountability of aid agencies to their beneficiaries. In Sierra Leone, concerns about the lack of regulation in the procurement and distribution of seeds and tools led to efforts to promote the local production of these inputs, involving the establishment of community seed banks. However, broad experience with such approaches has provided few examples of successful and sustainable activities, raising questions about their appropriateness. In Southern Sudan, attempts to strengthen informal seed systems led to the establishment of local seed production schemes in the mid-1990s. The extent to which these schemes were dependent on the NGOs involved became apparent when the NGOs were forced to pull out from Southern Sudan and the farmers could not market their seed. Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, free seed distributions still continue in selected parts of the country, and concerns about dependency remain.

Non-seed inputs and agricultural services

Farmers need access to a wide spectrum of inputs and services in order to produce effectively. It is increasingly recognised that the potential gains that can be achieved through one service, such as provision of quality seed, may be dependent on access to other complementary inputs, such as fertilizer, water for irrigation and pest control, in addition to extension advice, credit and market information services. Rather than attempting to coordinate all these different inputs and services, current agricultural development thinking suggests that interventions should be cognisant of the mix of inputs and services that farmers require and designed in such a way that farmers are able to benefit from the synergies between the different inputs and services that are available from different sources, both formal and informal. What tends to be implemented through agricultural rehabilitation efforts, however, are piecemeal, project-based approaches to the provision of inputs, extension or credit services, often with an emphasis on micro-level or ‘community-based’ interventions and insufficient attention to institutional forms at meso and macro levels. The current trend for Farmer Field Schools, for example, as an appropriate extension approach in post-conflict situations tends to lack the necessary linkages to service providers or sources of new and appropriate technologies. Similarly, micro-credit projects often fail to realise linkages with potential agricultural marketing channels. One exception to this might be the Southern Sudan Agricultural Enterprise Finance Programme, through its links with the Southern Sudan Agriculture Revitalization project.

Promoting markets in the agricultural sector

The major role of the private sector in the provision of agricultural inputs and services is increasingly recognized, but challenges occur repeatedly in enabling the emergence of service providers, stimulating demand, and improving the quality of inputs and accountability of services provided. One strategy for stimulating demand is to provide beneficiaries with the resources (cash or vouchers) to purchase the

inputs and services they require, in the hope that they will then become clients or even customers of emerging service providers. But evidence available to date from voucher systems in the country case studies suggests that the level of management by the implementing NGO is such that this move towards accountability on the part of service providers is not happening. Functioning output markets are equally important to enable farmers to sell their produce at profitable prices, yet — apart from Southern Sudan — the case studies found little evidence of coherent strategies for market-oriented programming. Efforts to promote the development of market systems and infrastructure tend to be localised, fragmented and poorly coordinated, and often focus on either input or output markets, with little integration between the two. In general, market-based approaches remain largely as wishes expressed in policy documents rather than programming reality. In Southern Sudan, however, USAID is supporting the foundations for economic recovery by providing credit and financial intermediation; training institutions that meet the skills constraints of entrepreneurs; and research and data analysis to recommend appropriate economic policies. These efforts are largely focused on the agricultural sector and support the eventual emergence of a rural economy driven by agriculture and livestock production and marketing.

The failure to address vulnerability

Current post-conflict programming tends to consist of piecemeal, project-based approaches with little evidence of coordinated strategy. This piecemeal approach is thought to respond essentially to ‘crisis thinking’. An emphasis on responding to crisis fails to reflect the resilience, capacities and ingenuity of rural populations. Despite an emphasis on targeting ‘vulnerable groups’, current agricultural interventions are inadequate in addressing the causes of vulnerability in post-conflict situations. The identification and labelling of ‘vulnerable groups’ tends to preclude an understanding of the structural causes of vulnerability, reconstituting such groups as passive ‘beneficiaries’ rather than people actively struggling to manage complex livelihoods. In addition, given that agriculture may not necessarily be the most important source of livelihood to the poorest households, interventions that are strictly agricultural are likely to benefit the better-off more than the poor, suggesting that additional efforts — particularly those focusing on consumption and livelihoods more broadly, including social protection strategies — are needed if vulnerability is to be alleviated.

Vulnerability and social protection

From a conventional livelihoods or developmental perspective, vulnerability — the extent to which a person or group is likely to be affected by adverse circumstances — is regarded largely as an external or exogenous factor. Discussions of vulnerability in relation to conflict, however, have noted that the root causes of vulnerability are also often internal or structural, relating to an individual’s or a community’s identity. Those belonging to particular groups may be the targets of violence or subject to exclusion, and it is not always the poorer or less well-resourced who are the most vulnerable. Aspects of vulnerability relating to inherited or ascribed traits do not necessarily disappear once a conflict has ended or widespread violence associated with it has apparently ceased.

Social protection is essentially concerned with the ways in which individuals’ or households’ resilience to adverse events can be strengthened. But social protection alone is insufficient to allow poor and vulnerable people to recover from a crisis; interventions to promote livelihoods are also required. The term ‘livelihood promotion’ tends to be used as a short-hand for measures intended to promote pro-poor growth, i.e., the promotion of asset accumulation, help to correct market failures, reduction of inequalities and the fostering of

social cohesion. In much of the literature there is a tendency to regard protection and promotion more in terms of the economic rather than the more social aspects relating to social equity, inclusion and non-discrimination. Yet appropriate social protection mechanisms in post-conflict situations must be based on an understanding of vulnerability that incorporates not only economic aspects but also more structural elements, including notions of powerlessness. Addressing such structural inequalities is by no means straightforward, and generally requires significant institutional reform. Although the need for such reform is often recognised in countries emerging from conflict, the next section will show that this is by no means easy.

Enhancing institutions

Institutions — both informal and formal — provide the primary entry point through which the aid community can support rural livelihoods in more sustainable ways. In supporting informal institutions, there are potential dangers that structural causes of poverty and vulnerability will be reinforced. In cases where particular institutions (such as chieftdom authorities in Sierra Leone, or land tenure structures in Southern Sudan) are regarded as a causal factor relating to the conflict, reform may be deemed necessary, but it must be accepted that institutional reform is both a sensitive issue and a very slow process.

The perceived need to fundamentally reform or replace state institutions is common in countries emerging from conflict, but neither is easy. There is often a tendency among external actors to assume that old structures have collapsed, and there is a blank slate for introducing new policies, institutions and processes. Such assumptions about the lack of state structures have proved to be misplaced. Post-war public sector reform in both Afghanistan and Sierra Leone has met with varying levels of resistance among politicians and civil servants, raising the question of whether crisis can really be used to motivate effective change. Citizens’ expectations for effective service and input delivery may mean that plans for reform are accorded a lower priority by politicians keen to provide cheap services to their constituents and supporters. Although major reform is often necessary, the challenges involved must not be underestimated.

Policy documents emphasise the private sector, but there is little evidence of practical initiatives in the agricultural sector to promote private enterprises which do not involve large loans or even grants. In post-conflict contexts, there is usually a plethora of NGOs providing heavily subsidised agricultural services and inputs, and a consequent risk of ‘crowding out’ private sector involvement because a level playing field for commercial competition is lacking. Although interventions aimed to strengthen markets are beginning to attract the attention of donors and programme planners, existing initiatives are still too recent for lessons about impact to have been generated. There is a need for caution about promoting market development without an adequate understanding of the political and economic relations of product and inputs markets, and the social relations through which they are structured in post-conflict situations. The level of government capacity in post-conflict countries is generally such that the state is incapable of fulfilling even a minimal regulatory role.

Few agencies would question the need to strengthen farmers’ organisations and civil society, and significant investment has been made in strengthening the capacity of organisations that claim to represent communities and farmers. But agricultural rehabilitation remains anchored in supply-driven service provision, and farmers’ organisations are seen as useful interlocutors in the supply of services to farmers. In other words, efforts to build capacity appear to be focused on building capacities to absorb aid, rather than to demand it. Despite rhetoric about ‘community-based’ or ‘community-driven’ interventions, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, there is little evidence that agencies are transferring their power to their community partners.

Conclusions: Agricultural programming for post-conflict transitions

Effective agricultural aid programming must relate to three contextual transitions that occur as fragile states emerge from conflict:

- (i) Security — from a situation in which there is insecurity involving high levels of violence to a more secure situation where there is relative tranquillity. It is important to note that the transition can also take place in the other direction (from tranquillity to violence).
- (ii) Livelihood strategies, markets and local institutions — this transition is often closely related to the local security context, and involves a shift from livelihood strategies that are asset-depleting (i.e. coping or survival strategies) to strategies that are asset-maintaining or asset-building (i.e. adaptive or accumulative strategies). This transition also involves the strengthening of markets and local institutions, made possible through increased levels of trust and collective action at local levels. Again, the transition in livelihood strategies and local institutions can also be reversed if security is not maintained.
- (iii) The nature of the state and formal institutions — this involves a political transition from a government that is absent, ineffective or illegitimate to one that is legitimate and effective, but which does not attempt to replace the private sector or civil society.

Although these three transitions are contextual, they should not be regarded as completely external to the changes that must be promoted through agricultural assistance. The ways in which assistance is programmed can either hinder or help each of these three transitions.

Agricultural support in conflict and post-conflict situations should facilitate the transition from supply-led programming to the establishment of sustainable (market-driven) systems for service delivery, developed within a framework of broad-based efforts to protect and promote rural livelihoods, as shown in Box 2.

This paper has shown that some interventions represented by each of the measures in Box 2 are already being implemented in fragile states emerging from conflict. Thus, we are not suggesting a dramatic change (though more effort needs to be placed on promoting markets), only that these interventions are regarded as part of a broader transition, and that there is greater emphasis on addressing issues of vulnerability and institution-building. Most importantly, the overall aim of a transition from supply-led programming to sustainable systems for service delivery offers a strategic vision that allows for the projectised nature of agricultural interventions to be overcome. Such a transition necessarily requires capacity-building at all levels (community, agency, government, private sector), a fundamental shift in the role of NGOs from implementers to facilitators, and clarity and consensus on the functions of the state as a regulatory body. In general, much greater emphasis should be placed on needs assessment and impact monitoring to enable a move towards empirically-based strategies with realistic, shared objectives.

Box 2: Measures that link agricultural rehabilitation and social protection

- Ensure that vulnerable farmers have access to agricultural inputs and services (tools for agriculture, seed, irrigation, pest control, animal health, microfinance, extension), either through direct distribution or interventions designed to stimulate choice, such as vouchers.
- Increase agricultural production through access to appropriate technology options.
- Increase rural incomes through the promotion of markets for agricultural products and labour.
- Establish the capacity, structures and institutions necessary for the sustainable delivery of inputs and services.
- Address vulnerability and social inequality through social protection and livelihood promotion.
- Promote the reforms necessary to address the structural causes of vulnerability.

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Endnotes

- 1 Approximately half of countries classified as fragile have also been affected by conflict.