An Outlook of State Fragility

A Reflective and Foresight Analysis

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"The following report was written at the request of Action Against Hunger's Executive Committee. Because one of our core activities is crisis response, fragile states are by definition a priority area. We have been there, in many of these countries, for more than ten years and we are there to stay until the situation has stabilised and we are no longer needed."

Jean-Michel Grand
Executive Director
Action Against Hunger UK

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Contents

Introduction

We open this study on Action Against Hunger's work in fragile states with the quote above, as it succinctly frames the motivation for this piece. State fragility is a pressing issue for the humanitarian sector. It is an issue that frames the operating environment for the largest share of our programming. The concept of state fragility is still evolving. There is not unified definition of it. However, the central themes are weakness in state legitimacy, authority, and service provision[1]. It should also be view as a continuum rather than a binary condition. Conflict is strongly associated with state fragility but does not inherently define it, cause it, or result from it. A better understanding of its complexities and challenges will allow us to plan and work for effectively in the future. Action Against Hunger's origins began in Afghanistan, and over nearly four decades the organization has continued to work extensively in fragile states. Programing in these settings is integral to the work we do and our identity as an organization. However, with no formal system in place to store and share institutional memory, much of it is lost over the years. It is the intent of this report to reflect on our experience working in this context and the knowledge base we have gained, while also looking to the future to see how we can best implement positive change.

The first half of the report is a foresight analysis of the drivers of state fragility. It identifies the heavy trends that will discernably shape the issue through 2030, including: protracted conflict, security apparatus, ethnic divisions, geographic barriers, unemployed youth bulge, vulnerability to natural hazards, petty corruption, and economic inequality. The key drivers for leveraging change within the system, are: conflict, displaced persons, social inclusion, access to basic services, and institutional sustainability. These six are described in more detail and were then used to develop three scenarios for what the future may look like in 2030 with regard to state fragility.

The second half of the report is a retrospective analysis of Action Against Hunger's work in fragile states. The focus is on Action Against Hunger's work in states with the highest levels of fragility. In such instances, conflict typically becomes intertwined with the issue. Based on a desk review and interviews with staff, we identify five common themes: principled action, access and security, collaboration and partnerships, building and retaining capacity, and data and quality control. For each we present the lessons that we have learned and offer recommendations for how to more effectively operate in fragile states. It is also advised that we develop a more formalized system for storing and sharing our institutional memory.
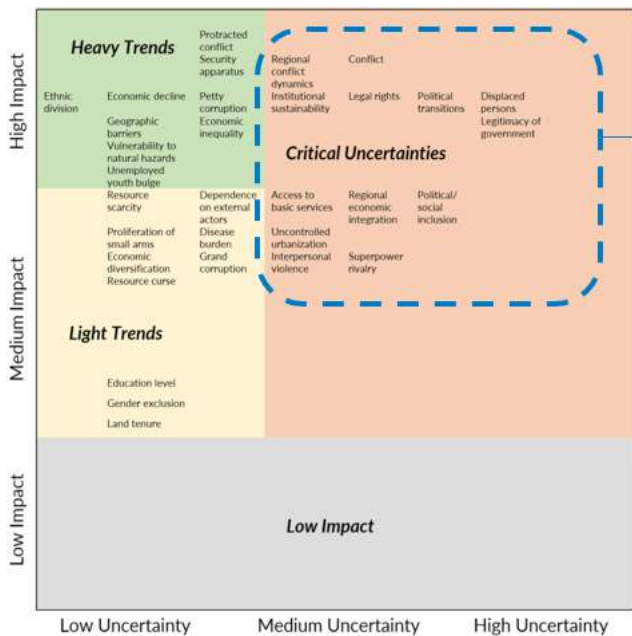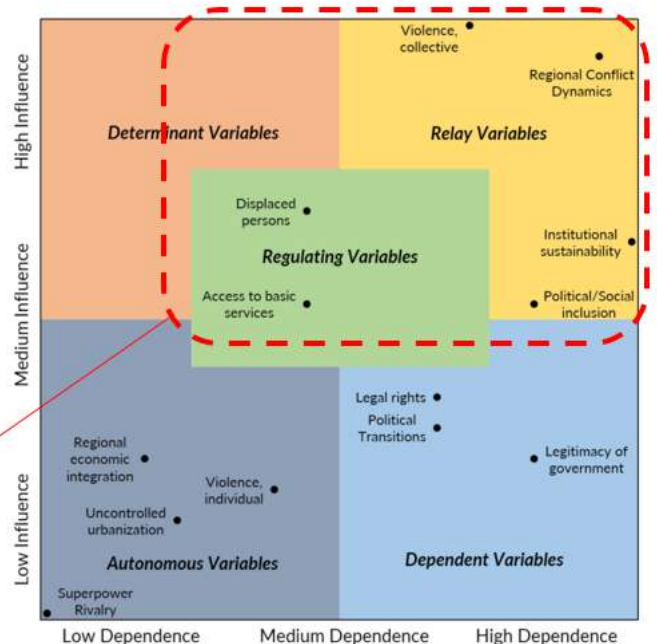

Image by Sergey Neamoscou

Foresight Analysis of the Drivers of State Fragility and Outlook to 2030

The first section of the report consists of a scenario analysis of the drivers of state fragility. The methods are based on a structured analysis. A list of drivers[2] was compiled based on a literature review of the subject. These were then scored based on their level of impact on state fragility and the level of certainty over their evolution from 2017 to 2030. The results were then graphed on to an impact-uncertainty matrix. The drivers were then categorized based on their placement on the graph. Those in the upper-left portion were deemed to be heavy trends, those drivers with a strong impact and predictable trajectory. These were then taken to be working assumptions that would hold true for all the scenarios. The drivers in the center-left and lower-left were considered to be light trends that can similarly provide context to the scenarios but were of less impact and so were not focused on in this report. The drivers in the center to upper right portion of the graph were judged to be critical uncertainties, those drivers whose future impact on state fragility was less certain. These drivers were then applied to a second analysis known as a MICMAC in which each driver's level of influence on each other was scored from 0 – 3. The sum of how much influence each driver had on the total of the others and the sum of the total amount the others influenced it were then used to generate an influence-dependence matrix. Based on the placement of each critical uncertainty on this graph, their position in the system of interactions that drive state fragility was better understood. The six most influential of these were then selected and used as the basis of the scenarios. Each of the three scenarios contains one possible course that the driver could take. The scenarios are based on an optimistic, business as usual, and pessimistic combination of outcomes.

Heavy Trends

The following drivers of state fragility will continue to shape the issue in a predictable manner through 2030. These should be treated as working assumptions that will hold true for each of the scenarios.

Protracted conflict will continue, mostly in the form of civil wars. While a few may be resolved, others will emerge. They will be focused in Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. International effects continue to be focused on conflict prevention and containment rather than on addressing the root causes of existing protracted conflicts. While few in number, these crises will consume a disproportionate share of humanitarian resources.

Security apparatus. Sovereign states hold a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Their military and law enforcement bodies are used to maintain the government's social contract with its people. However, fragile states will continue to have weak security apparatuses that can be challenged by domestic and/or foreign actors.

Ethnic divisions will continue to shape conflict and weaken the unity of the state. The level of ethnic factionalization, which generally increases with number of groups, is tied to conflict over resources. While ethnic polarization, which generally decreases with number of groups, is correlated to competition for power.

Geographic barriers, such as mountains and wetlands, hinder the flow of goods and people, impeding economic growth and the delivery of service and promoting social fragmentation. Transportation infrastructure can mitigate these obstacles, but the development of such is not expected to increase significantly in fragile states by 2030.

Unemployed youth bulge. Most fragile states are experiencing a youth bulge, a disproportionately high number of individual between 15-24 years of age. When this population is heavily unemployed, it can lead to resentment and social unrest. It also represents a lost opportunity to exploit the demographic dividend for a unique period of high economic growth.

Vulnerability to natural hazards will continue to be a barrier to reducing fragility. Disasters take a heavy toll on the state and population. Resources are diverted from development initiatives to recovery efforts. The repeated occurrence of disasters perpetuates state fragility or even worsens conditions.

Petty corruption undermines the rule of law, the integrity of institutions, and public trust in leaders. Money is also diverted away from essential government services. Corruption flourishes in fragile states by exploiting weak institutions and lack of government structure.

Economic inequality remains persistently high in fragile states where it inhibits growths and is a source of tension that threatens social and political stability. A more equitable distribution of resources, particularly ending extreme poverty would allow for greater economic activity and growth. However, entrenched power structures are continuing to divert most of the nation's wealth to a small elite.

Image by Sergey Neamoscou

Critical Uncertainties

The following drivers will shape state fragility in an unpredictable manner. There are different ways that they may unfold in the future. They have been grouped based on their system of interaction with each other, the total influence each driver has on all the others and the total amount all the others influence it. This classification system is intended to provide insight into which drivers make for better programming targets, so as to more efficiently influence the system driving state fragility. The six with the greatest influence, in this instance the Relay and Regulating variables, were used to develop the scenarios and so a description of each is presented in the following section.

Determinant variables: These drivers have a high level of influence on the other drivers, while being very minimally influenced in return. They, therefore, are starting points of the system and shape it the most. However, it can be very difficult for actors to influence their behavior.
- none

Relay variables: These drivers have a high level of influence and a high level of dependence on the other drivers. As such, they are central to the network of interaction. They are therefore ideal targets for actors seeking to influence the system.
- Conflict
- Institutional sustainability
- Social inclusion

Regulating variables: These drivers have a medium level of influence and dependence. They are central to the system but less potency than the relay variables.
- Displaced persons
- Access to basic services

Dependent variables: These drivers have a low level of influence and a high level of dependence. They are therefore outputs to the system. Their outcomes are largely the result of other more influential drivers.
- Legal rights
- Legitimacy of the government
- Political transitions

Autonomous variables: These drivers have low influence and dependence. They therefore have little interaction with the wider system and thus act more independent of it.
- Regional economic integration
- Interpersonal violence
- Uncontrolled urbanization
- Superpower rivalries

Image by Sergey Neamoscou

Scenario Drivers

The following drivers represent the most influential of the critical uncertainties for the future of state fragility. They will therefore serve as the basis of scenarios, which will explore how possible futures based on combinations of possible outcomes for each of these drivers. They were selected from the relay and regulating variables described above. Determinant variables would also have been included had any drivers fallen into this category.

Conflict

Conflict is a strongly associated with state fragility. The repercussions of conflict are widespread. It undermines the legitimacy of the state, its ability to provide service, disrupts the economy, displaces segments of the population, and so one. Such a cascade effect on the other determinants of state fragility attest to its impactfulness. Yet, the relationship is not unidirectional, for while conflict may drive state fragility, it is also often the eventual consequence of it too[3]. The conditions that result from a fragile state breed many of the root causes of conflict such as poverty, horizontal inequality, and the failure of inclusive governance and the social contract[4].

While protracted conflicts are expected to continue, the extent and intensity of other forms of conflict are more difficult to predict. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been on average less armed conflicts[5] around the world. Falling from a high of 51 in 1991 down to a low of 32 in 1993/95 before growing again in recent years to 40 in 2014[6]. The variation in number of conflicts is mostly minor conflict, having battle related deaths of greater than 25 persons, as opposed to wars that are defined as having battle related deaths greater than 1,000. The number of wars has similarly fallen from 12 in 1991 to a low of 4 in 1997, only to rise to 11 in 2014. Battle related deaths has been even more variable. There was a spike during 1990/91 reaching 70-80,000 deaths before falling to a rough average of 30,000 until spiking to a similar height again in 1999/2000. Deaths then fell to around 20,000 a year until beginning to rise in 2012 and reach a high of over 100,000 in 2014. While the sudden rise in conflict numbers and intensity is alarming, these numbers are still far lower than in much of the 20th century when major interstate wars resulted in far more serve death tolls. The presence of foreign troops is also of concern as it often delays or impedes conflict resolution. In 2014 the 40 active conflicts were occurring on 27 locations. The discrepancy in number is because certain locations witnessed conflicts between multiple groups, such as a government actively fighting multiple rebel groups. All of these conflicts, with the exception of that between India and Pakistan, were occurring intrastate. However, one third still had foreign states contributing combatants or support more widely to at least one side. So, while they are not technically interstate wars they are caught up in a wider regional, or international, conflict dynamic. Examining past trends in the number, nature, and intensity of conflict show that it is highly variable and therefore difficult to forecast even a few years into the future. There are a couple of basic patterns though. Interstate conflicts are becoming less common. Most conflicts are intrastate and they are becoming more internationalized. Intrastate conflicts can lead to interstate conflicts. Battle related deaths tend to remain relatively low until a major conflict causes them to spike for a couple of years after which they fall again[7].

Most conflicts occur within states. However, the consequences and causes are often regional in nature. The transnational dimensions of conflict are most focused in their immediate region where the greatest level of interaction occurs[8]. A crisis in one state often has a destabilizing effect on its neighbors. In the most extreme instances, violent conflicts will also spread across borders. Today, many of the world's protracted crises are regional affecting the Middle-East, Central Asia, and the Chad Basin and Western Rift Valley of Africa. Many conflicts start with different national causal mechanisms but are fueled by a series of regional dynamics. Non-state actors, especially those linked to cross border populations, contribute significantly to the spreading of violence in the region, especially militias, terrorist organizations, and groups involved in illegal trafficking. Ethnic insurgencies, will cross the arbitrary colonial borders that they are fighting against[9]. Refugee flows that usually find refugees in overcrowded makeshift camps just across the border are even a strong transmitter of conflicts. While most are simply seeking to escape conflict, some serve to extend the networks of rebel groups and enable transnational diffusion of combatants, weapons, and ideology[10]. Neighboring states also contribute to regional conflict dynamics by providing funding or logistical support to their preferred side. This can include supplying arms, training, and even bases safely within their borders. Such states may be intending to install a favorable regime or simply to loot their neighbor's resources. There are many other political, economic, or cultural reasons why intranational conflicts can grow to becoming transnational. The important point, though, is that conflicts are often fueled by regional dynamics. In such instances, it requires regional responses to resolving them, rather than just directing programming to the immediate conflict zone. The extent to which conflicts become entangled in wider regional dynamics in the near future remains uncertain. It depends on many other factors such as the root causes of the conflicts, the motives of neighboring states to become involved, political alliances, and the success of peacebuilding efforts from regional and international organizations.

Displaced Persons

Displacement is commonly thought of as a result of state fragility as poverty, conflict, persecution, or a range of other push factors force people out of their homes and communities. However, it is also a significant driver of state fragility as it can overburden state or local services, increasing unemployment rates and consumer prices, and by bringing conflict with them, both in terms of sectarian divisions and small arms[11]. The cascade effect impacts many other drivers, the sum of which can severely erode the resilience of states unless they have the necessary resources and capacity to address the situation. From 1996 to 2012, the total share of displaced persons around the world has remained relatively steady at around 0.6%. However, there has been a recent spike with the figure reaching nearly 0.9% or 65 million in 2015[12]. In 2015, nearly 60% of displaced persons were classified as IDPS, while a quarter were refugees. The remainder fell into the smaller categories of stateless, asylum seekers, refugee like situations, other situations of concern, and returned refugees and IDPs[13].

By the end of 2015, there were 16.1 million refugees in the world, the highest number in decades. The countries of origin for refugees was greatest from Syria (4.9m), Afghanistan (2.6m), Somalia (1.1m), South Sudan (0.8m), Sudan (0.7m), DR Congo (0.5m), CAR (0.5m), Myanmar (0.5m), Eritrea (0.4m), and Columbia (0.3m). The largest refugee hosting countries were in the Middle East and South Asia, including Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, and Jordan, followed by East and Central Africa with Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, DR Congo, and Chad. Most of these hosting countries are developing countries adjacent to the crises from where the refugees are fleeing. Consequently, the large flows of displaced people within the region can create new economic burdens, social tensions, and even extend conflict from the immediate crisis zone to neighboring states.

A large share of these refugee situations has grown protracted, defined as lasting for more than 5 years[14]. It is estimated that 6.7 million (41%) of refugees qualify as such. There are 32 protracted refugee situations that together have an average duration of 26 years and counting, such as Afghans in Pakistan and Iran who initially fled at the start of the Soviet invasion in 1979. The resettlement of refugees has been decreasing. From 1990-2015, the trend has been highly variable ranging from 3 million to 100,000. However, the since 2004, the trend is clearer and has declined to the low end of this range.

By the end of 2015, there were 40.8 million IDPs of which 8.6 million were newly displaced. Middle Eastern conflicts (Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) were the greatest contributors to this upsurge, accounting for nearly half of this latter figure. While other countries that saw large numbers of IDPs in 2015 included: Ukraine, DR Congo, Sudan, and Afghanistan. There has been a short-term rise in the number of IDPs who were able to return home, reaching 2.3 million in 2015.

The future displacement trends are tied to that of other issues like conflict, institutional sustainability, access to services, and social/political inclusion. It is a complex issue that requires multifaceted solutions. "Without safe environments, administrative and legal pathways to formal solutions, access to economic opportunities, and inclusion of displaced people in all aspects of social and cultural life, solutions cannot be achieved"[15].

Access to Basic Services

Service delivery is described by the literature as one of the most central components of state fragility. It is often used by organizations and researchers to qualify the presence of fragility. The ability to provide basic services to its citizenry is one of the basic responsibilities of a state. While there is a clear link between fragile states and low-income countries, fragility is evident when a state's provision of services is clearly below that of other countries within their economic level. This can be determined by comparing economic measures to service outcome such as infant mortality rates or access to improved water[16]. Other less tangible services include health, education, security, and justice.

Service delivery is like most of the other drivers in that it is "both a cause and characteristic of fragility"[17]. Failing to provide such services leads to fragility as it erodes the resilience of the state and populace, as well as the perceived legitimacy of the state. While in turn, fragility reduces the ability of states to deliver services, creating a negative feedback loop. Service delivery has been a central focus of humanitarian and development interventions. Humanitarian responses aim is to provide for the deficiencies, while development initiatives seek to develop the state's delivery capacity. Increasing programs are seeking to bridge this divide. The intention is to meet immediate needs while also building up the state's capacity to do so in the future, eventually allowing them to lift themselves out of fragility. Two notes of caution are present. One, that when humanitarian actors provide services for states they can risk undermining the state's ability to develop its own capacity unless done in a coordinated fashion. The other is that providing services to marginalized groups can stoke political and social tensions[18]. Also, it is not proven that development work, even when activities are built up with the government, actually helps in lifting the state out of fragility.

Institutional Sustainability

Another characteristic and cause of state fragility is weak institutions. The mechanisms of the state may not be fully institutionalized, relying instead on traditional systems of patronage. Additionally, the state may not have institutional hegemony, where other actors compete with or replace the state in various functions. In developing a legal structure of authority, in the form of a modern bureaucracy, a state can lay the necessary foundations for furthering its resilience[19]. The need to strengthen institutions in fragile states is widely called for, but it is also necessary for these institutions to be sustainable, able to support themselves and persist overtime and through crises. Humanitarian and development actors provide many crucial services in fragile states. However, such programming is not always done within the context of developing the state's own institutions. To break the cycle of dependence, states must eventually be able to provide for themselves everything that external actors may be doing for them currently. As such, long-term development interventions should be designed with an eventual handover in mind. For example, the World Bank notes that many community-driven development programs in fragile states have been very effective at providing short-term assistance but have no mechanisms in place to sustain them over the long-term by integrating them with government programs[20]. For development programs to have lasting results beyond their funding windows they must eventually be tied in to the apparatuses of the state. Such will also serve to develop the government's capacity and legitimacy. However, state bureaucracy must be developed enough to for the transition to be successful. Therefore, while institutional sustainability is a necessary requirement for the development of state resilience, it is also dependent on other preconditions being met.

Social Inclusion

Resilient states tend towards representative governments that honor their social contract. To this end, all culturally defined groups should be included, be they defined based on ethnicity, religion, class, or other form of identity[21]. Inclusion requires that all groups are able to participate in society and government, access resources, and assert their legal rights. The existence of horizontal inequalities between culturally defined groups is evidence that exclusions persists[22]. The exclusion of segments of the society reduces the perceived legitimacy of the state and can lead to direct challenges to the state's authority, even through violent means. Such inequalities between groups fosters resentment that can leads to into direct opposition to the authoritative body that is perceived to be the cause[23]. Disenfranchised youth are particularly susceptible to being so mobilized[24]. Recent research has found this link between social exclusion and conflict is evident since 2000, while less definitive before then. Additionally, this link is more defined when the inequality is spatially defined. That is to say, that when disadvantaged groups are spread through a country they are less prone to violent conflict to address their grievances than if that group is concentrated in a subnational region[25]. The issue of social exclusion is central to the literature on state fragility. However, it is always discussed as inextricably interwoven with other drivers such as conflict, access to services, legal rights, and state legitimacy. Based on this literature, as well as our own analysis, it is found to be a central driver of state fragility but one that also has an uncertain trajectory over the next fifteen years. Its outcome being so interlinked with that of others.
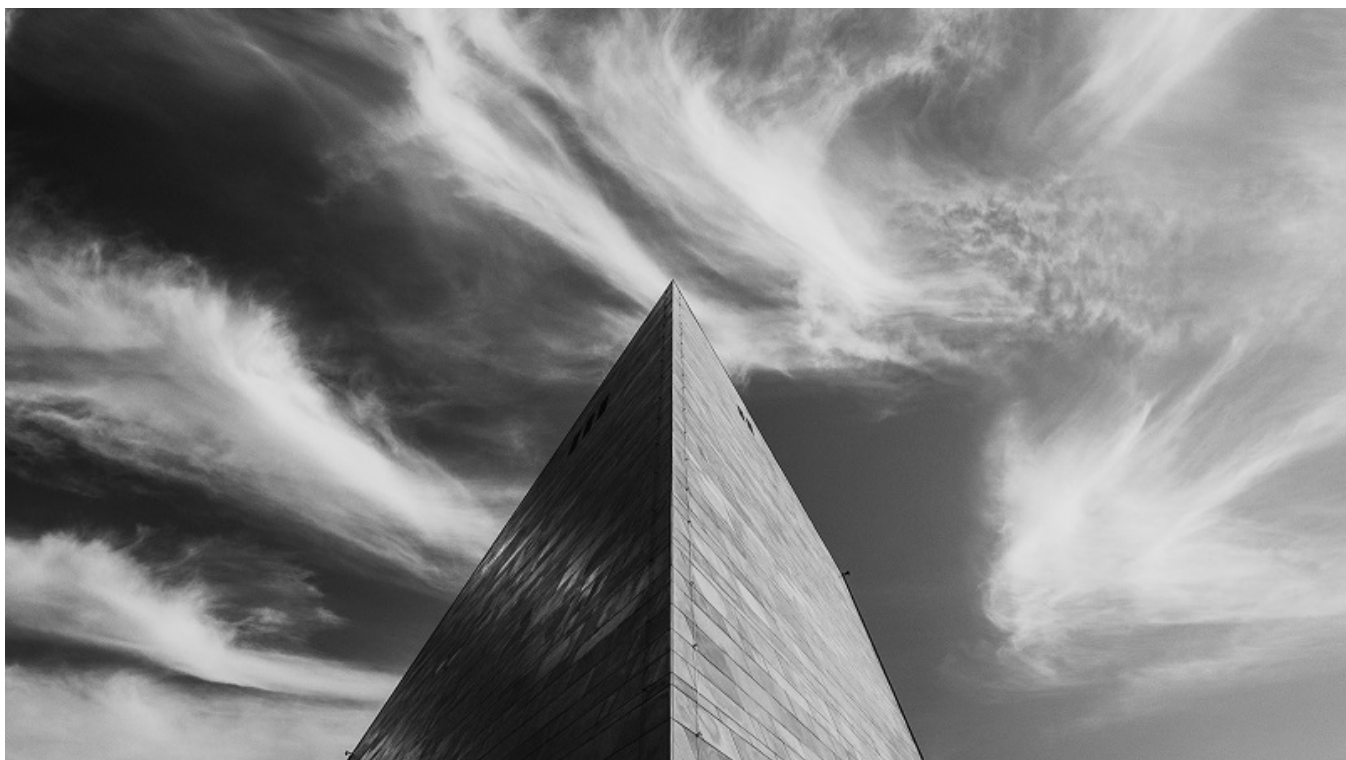

Image by Dawid Zawila

Scenarios

The following three scenarios have been developed based on possible outcomes of the six drivers of state fragility discussed in the preceding section. The heavy trends discussed previously are to be taken as working assumptions that hold true for all the scenarios. Each scenario describes a possible future in the year 2030. They are not to be taken as predictions of what will come.

Rather, they depict three archetypal paths it may follow. The first is a continuation of conditions as they exist today. The second, on what would occur if trends turn for the worse. The third, if things shift for the better. By understanding the range of possible outcomes we face, we can better plan for these eventualities and in so doing be prepared for whatever the future may hold.

Scenarios

Drivers	Buttressed (Optimistic)	Sisyphean (Business as Usual)	Shattered (Pessimistic)
Conflict and Regional Conflict Dynamics	↓	→	↑
Displaced persons	↓	→	↑
Access to basic services	↑	→	↓
Institutional sustainability	↑	→	↓
Social inclusion	↑	→	↓

1. Sisyphean: a business as usual scenario

State fragility remains a consistent problem around the world in 2030, one that continues to consume the majority of international development and humanitarian efforts. Conflict remains a primary driver of state fragility, every time one ends a new one takes its place and we still have not managed to end many of the protracted conflicts. The world is continuing to averaging about 40 active conflicts for the past half century. Periods of relative stability are interrupted by the onset of major hostilities lasting for several years, as was with the case of the Middle East crisis in the 2010s and the East Africa crisis in the 2020s. The number of people dying every year as a direct result of conflict would then spike from about 20,000 to over 100,000. While things have settled down again, most believe it is only a matter of time until the next major crisis. Efforts are still being made on regional cooperation to keep conflicts limited in scope and from weakening conflict afflicted or adjacent states. Yet, such work is often undermined by belligerent neighbors and non-state actors. Opportunistic politicians, alienated ethnic groups, and criminal and terrorist organizations feed off any breakdown in order and spread it throughout their region. It has often seemed like a tossup as to whether peace or chaos would prevail. When these crises strike, the progress towards institutional sustainability is often undone. While organizational culture and technical capacities have greatly improved, but many still require external financial support and struggle to maintain their political independence. For instance, during ethnic conflicts, the rights of members of the opposition groups are often still legally safeguarded but that does not always protect them from extrajudicial persecution. Health and educational ministries still try to keep providing services, even after much of their budgets are reallocated to defense spending in times of unrest. It still frequently requires the intervention of humanitarian programs to keep hospitals and schools open. Even then, many lose access to basic services, particularly in the conflict zones. Large numbers people are still being displaced from war and natural disasters. Most remain in underserved camps in their own country or across the border. The poor conditions of which often contributes to the level of suffering and can even be another source of instability that extends the crisis. However, enough regional and international effort has kept these situations from spiraling into large scale involuntary migrations. The 2015 and 2026 European Refugee Crises were exceptions rather than becoming the norm. Extensive humanitarian and development programming are keeping the situation from further deteriorating, but little progress has been achieved towards building resilience.

2. Shattered: a pessimistic scenario

The international humanitarian situation is far worse in 2030 than in previous decades. Far greater numbers of states are now experiencing fragility. The world has witnessed a series of calamities in recent years. First in the Middle East, then sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. Conflict is a driving force that exacerbates the situations. Battle related deaths have stayed above the 100,000 mark as they have grown more severe. Most of these conflicts start within countries but soon spread to their neighbors. Regional cooperation is not occurring. Instead nearby states are becoming involved, supporting one group or another in hopes of installing a friendly regime, or in some cases, simply as an excuse to loot resources from the conflict zone. Domestic politics increasingly excludes out-groups. Politicians fan the social resentments that have grown against minority segments of the population. This in turn alienates these groups further and drives them to backing opposition forces. Government institutions prove ineffective in resolving the political and social grievances. They also become increasingly coopted to supporting partisan goals rather than fulfilling the social contract for all citizens. Basic services become even more difficult to access as violence impedes their delivery and states divert resources to the security sector. Large shares of the population are then forced to flee their homes. In the beginning, most ended up in camps within their own country or just across the border. But as the crises spread large scale involuntary migrations began to flow out of the region. Europe was the preferred destination until they became overwhelmed and began shutting down their borders. Increasingly refugees from South Asia are moving east while those in East Africa are traveling south, creating tensions as they moved into these new regions. These series of crises serve to destabilize much of the developing world. Even states not directly afflicted by conflict still suffer economic declines and social instability. Decades of work in building up these states was quickly undone. Now state fragility is the norm across large portions of the world.

3. Buttressed: an optimistic scenario

The world is not perfect in 2030, but humanitarian conditions around the world have improved. Many of the protracted conflicts continue, but there are less new conflicts starting and those that do have not escalated or spread like before. Where as in the mid-2010s we saw the number of people dying as a result of conflict spike to over 100,000, that figure has since remained below the 20,000 mark. Also, now when violence breaks out, states are working proactively in regional blocs to contain and resolve it. Such regional cooperation is allowing for conflict dynamics to be more successfully addressed. Belligerent non-state actors are no longer given safe heavens and other states are being discouraged, politically, from exploiting the situation. Government institutions are succeeding in maintaining their relevance even during the crises. They are standing for the political rights of all citizen groups even when this is not popular with political leaders or even the public at large. But it is serving to soften the partisan divide and provided a mechanism for reconciliation. Additionally, such institutional resilience is helping to ensure that basic services are provided for even during these periods of crisis. This keeps crises from growing and from displacing as many people. Refugees and IDPs are provided for and have emerged as an important bloc in pushing for peace. In hindsight, it appears that many states have reached a tipping point where they are now capable enough to make it through crises that would have otherwise shattered them before, and now are on an unbroken path towards greater resiliency.

Image by Sergey Neamoscou

Scenarios Projections

The following is a projection of how state fragility may appear under the different scenarios in 2030. Again, this is not to be taken as a prediction of what will happen, but is an illustration of what could happen given possible future outcomes. So, the result for any one country is less important than the patterns of extent and distribution.
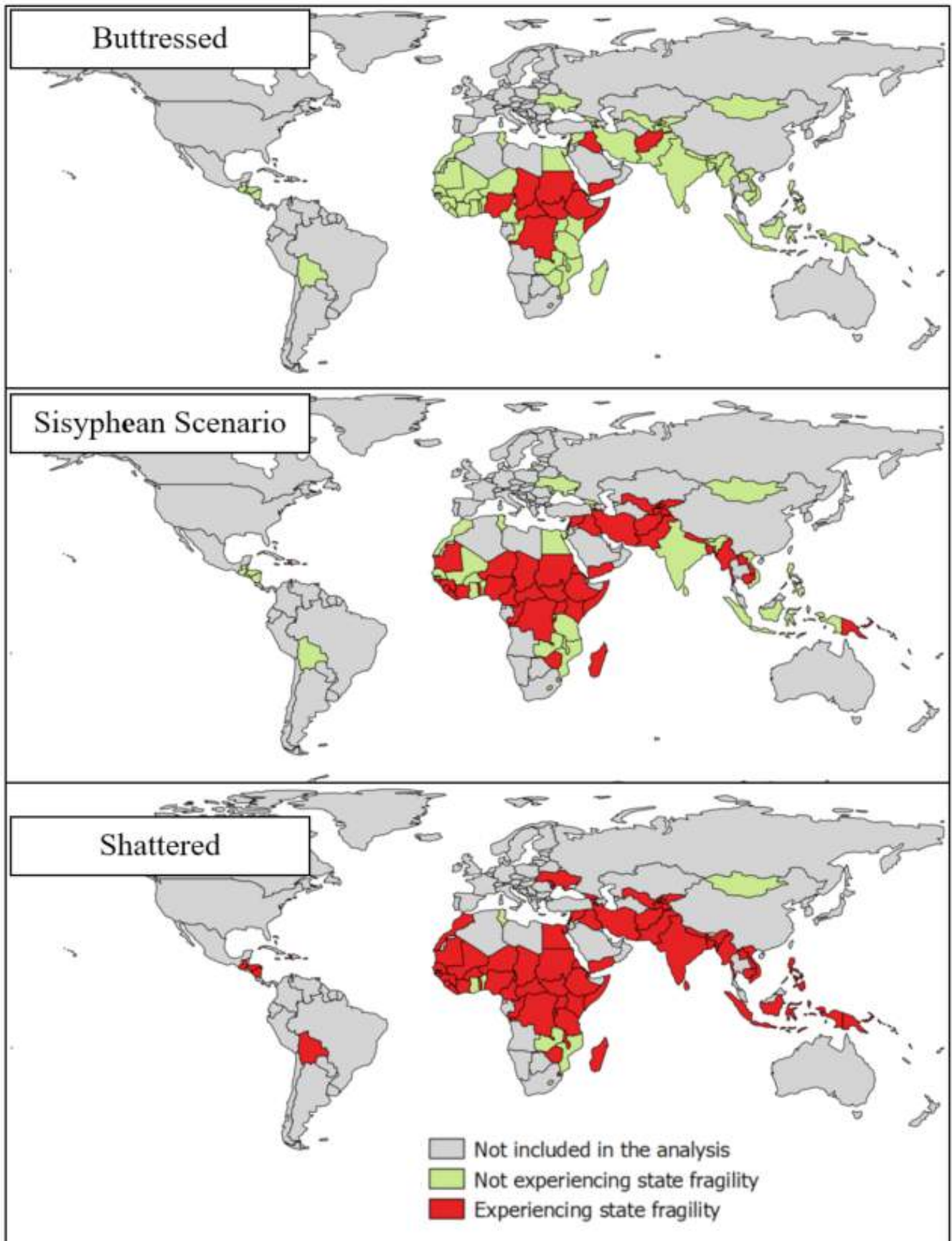
The projections are based on a regression model of the drivers[26]. For each of the three scenarios, the values of the indicator representing the driver was altered to fit the scenario. These values were then rerun through the model to project a Fragile State Index score. The changes shown in the table below represent the percent change to the indicator value. The one exception was for displaced person under the Shattered scenario where an additional 3% was added to existing percentage. Fragility was deemed to exist for scores greater than 90.

Driver	Indicator	Buttressed	Sisyphean	Shattered
Conflict	Political Stability and Absence of Violence score (WB/WGI)	-25%	0%	+100%
Regional Conflict Dynamics	Neighbor in conflict (UCDP/PRIO)	-25%	0%	+100%
Displaced persons	Refugees + IDPs (% of pop) (WB)	-50%	0%	+0.03
Access to basic services	Access to improved water (% of pop) (WB)	+50%	0%	-50%
Institutional sustainability	Government effectiveness score (WB/WGI)	-25%	0%	+100%
Social inclusion	Voice and Accountability score (WB/WGI)	-25%	0%	+100%

Image by Sergey Neamoscou

A Visual Representation of the Scenarios

Buttressed

Sisyphean Scenario

Shattered

Not included in the analysis
Not experiencing state fragility
Experiencing state fragility

Reflective Analysis of Action Against Hunger's Work in Fragile States

The Global Nutrition Report 2016[27] showed that the prevalence of both stunting and wasting are higher in fragile states (36% and 10% respectively) than in non-fragile states (26% and 8% respectively). This is because state fragility can lead to weakening of government institutions, systems and services, conflict and other problems that impact the population. The result of this can be both acute and chronic needs in the population that need to be addressed with humanitarian and development assistance. Action Against Hunger's vision of 'a world free from hunger' compels us to help those who most in need through our work in nutrition, WASH and health, as well as addressing the nexus between humanitarian and development assistance with our work in food security and livelihoods, disaster risk reduction and preparedness.

Because our expertise takes us to those most in need, and this need is often the result of state fragility, 33 of the 49 countries where we work are categorized as fragile states by this study[28]. This in itself posed a significant challenge to synthesizing the lessons learned from our operations. In some of these fragile states, the needs stem from ongoing civil war and conflict, while in others it is from repeated exposure to natural disasters. In some fragile states, government systems and provision of services are strong, while in others there can be an almost complete degradation of services and infrastructure. This, compounded by the fact that none of these conditions are mutually exclusive, makes the concept of operating in 'fragile states' a complex one to unravel. The common theme however, is that the ability of both governments and communities to cope with shocks and stressors is reduced over time, to the point where the populations are in need of support. This piece highlights five common themes that affect our ability to meet these needs, in the hope that the lessons learned can lead to increasing our impact in fragile states in the future.

Principled Action

In addition to upholding the humanitarian principles and the Red Cross Code of Conduct, Action Against Hunger maintains its own Charter of Principles. Together, these form the foundation for our strategic and operational decision making. In support of this, in 2013 the organization published "Humanitarian Principles in Conflict. Ensuring humanitarian principles are respected in armed conflicts and other situations of violence: ACF's experience and position"[29].

Our analysis has reinforced the belief that upholding these principles facilitates our operations. In fact, more than one interviewee stated that taking the time at the beginning of a project to clearly communicate your principles and intentions could be the difference between reaching those in need and not being able to operate at all.

> "The better you communicate who you are, what are your principles, how you are going to work, what will be your approaches… you generate an understanding and a better level of acceptance… Often we don't take that time, and it's proven over and over again that if you do take that time, you actually gain time"
>
> **Isabelle Moussard-Carlsen**
> **Director of Operations**
> **Action Against Hunger France**

By being open and honest about where and what we are doing, and with whom we work, the organization is able to illustrate its independence, neutrality, and non-discrimination to host governments and partners. This not only allows us to obtain legal registration, but maintain our registration in times of conflict or political instability.

The difficulty comes in contexts where conflict has made it all but impossible for actors to gain access to communities without working with governments, military or non-stated armed groups. How then does Action Against Hunger remain neutral and impartial while still serving those in need?

One example of this (though there are others) would be in Somalia, where humanitarian action has become increasingly politicized, and agencies must work with either the government or UN integrated mission to gain access to those in need, thereby compromising our principles. It is in these settings that we must takes steps to press for impartial and neutral access to populations. In this context, a publicly-available case study[30] was commissioned to analyze the impact of the UN integrated mission (UNSOM) on the sector, with recommendations for the UN, IASC, donors and all other actors. It is this kind of advocacy that strengthens our position and reputation in the areas in which we work, and should be replicated in other settings where we feel our neutrality or impartiality are being misinterpreted.

For further information on Access in Somalia, please refer to the 'Focus On' box below.

Access & Security

Some of the most common challenges when working in fragile states relate to access and security. While these conditions are important in all humanitarian contexts, they are particularly prominent in fragile situations where exclusionary policies towards opposition and minority groups, as well as political violence and criminality may be more common. Both access and security are affected by various forces, and are intertwined with one another. Through a review of Action Against Hunger documents, it was found that access had been hampered through various means. Non-authorization is one of those means, and has been observed in Myanmar[31] and Yemen[32] among others. Not being allowed access by actors in charge (be they state or non-state), has led to the organization moving programs, and delays to others.

As we have already heard one of Action Against Hungers strengths is our implementation of the humanitarian principles in times of fragility and conflict. This is particularly important when negotiating access with local power structures. Action Against Hunger prioritizes an acceptance approach to access and is careful not to accept armed protection from either state or non-state groups in times of conflict. In this way we have been able to negotiate access to some highly fragile settings, such as Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan (in this instance, negotiations were full mediated by local communities.

Security also impacts the organization's operations in fragile states, and also has an impact on access. Depending on the severity of the incident, steps may need to be taken to ensure the safety of staff. More severe incidents may require the evacuation of staff from the country, which can impact programs[33]. Other forms of insecurity influence which method of transport is used to access areas,[34] or even whether we are able to access them[35]. Both access and security have affected the work we undertake, but steps have been taken to mitigate their impacts.

One success is Action Against Hunger's ability to incorporate lessons learned into action. After the incidents in Muttur, Sri Lanka in 2006, the organization took a long reflection regarding security. The creation of a security focal-point at HQ was created, and procedures and protocols were put in place for any future incidents such as kidnappings[36]. These protocols have been relevant in areas such as the Central African Republic, where when the situation deteriorated, staff were confined to quarters, and HQ was put on alert in the event that an evacuation was warranted[37]. Additionally, in areas that are too hard to access due to insecurity or non-authorization, Action Against Hunger is successful in operating using a remote-management approach. This was the case in Yemen in April 2015 where the international coordination team was evacuated to Amman, and later moved to Djibouti to manage the program remotely due to the insecurity in-country. When the government regained control of Aden, Action Against Hunger was among the first aid agencies to reopen its office[38]. In Syria, the challenges due to insecurity and impaired access have been mitigated through controlled/minimized travel between country office and field programs, and remote monitoring has been implemented to minimize risks[39].

In all contexts, access and security may be enhanced through the use of partnerships with local organizations, private entities, or governments. These relationships allow us to undertake work in remote areas, where we may not be able to freely go. In instances like this it is important to consider the what kind of risk we are transferring to the local or national organization offering to conduct the work, and if it is indeed worth it. If we are unable to fulfil our mandate ourselves due to security, is it right to transfer that risk to others? There is no 'one size fits all' solution for deciding with who we should partner and when; each context requires careful consideration of the context. One thing that is clear is that how we remotely manage partnerships in order to gain access will continue to garner attention as humanitarian access is challenged and the work of INGOs restricted.

Collaborations & Partnerships

Time and time again, our operational evaluations have praised Action Against Hunger's work with collaborators and partners as key for facilitating our work in fragile states. This may be our collaboration with local and national governments in missions like Pakistan[40], Sierra Leone[41], and Zimbabwe[42], or our work with local non-governmental organizations in Central African Republic[43], the Democratic Republic of the Congo[44], the Sahel region[45], and Uganda[46] to name but a few. There are countless other examples where we work with partners, consortia, and committees, all of which lead to our success in these countries.

It is worth highlighting that, as an organization, we have yet to define what 'partnership' means, and how this is distinguished from collaborators. It may be that partners are organizations who receive funding from the network, as opposed to collaborators who instead work with us to support and enable our work. If we define partners this way, we do not have many country missions with true partnerships. As an organization, we are more inclined to take on the work ourselves. Even without this clearly defined, we still have to ask what is the difference between a successful relationship and an unsuccessful one?

In many contexts, relationships have been built and maintained over long periods of time, sometimes close to 40 years. In Syria[47], where we have been since 2008, and the relationships built with both local government and partners before the conflict began have been instrumental in facilitating our continued work there now that the humanitarian need has increased. In Yemen[48], where we have been working since 2012, our existing partnerships allowed us to respond to a surge in health needs during the 2016 cholera outbreak. These examples highlight just a few instances of when investing time in collaboration and partnership has allowed us to meet the needs of beneficiaries, and where without these relationships we may have been less effective.
The duration of our stay in a country allows us to unravel not only the needs and expectations of our beneficiaries, but also of our partners, which helps keep us aligned under a shared vision. But partnerships are built on more than just time. Successful partnerships produce results because of a shared vision, and by capitalizing on each other's expertise. The evaluations highlight a number of instances in which Action Against Hunger has not

utilized the expertise of local partners and programs have suffered as a result. This is often because failing to consult partners early on to utilize their extensive knowledge of the culture and context results in programs not being fit-for-purpose. This can cause problems from delays in the project, through to a project ending altogether. Though we have a clear set of partnership guidelines and a partnership toolkit to guide us in this, these are not always utilized.

What is clear is that as we move forward in reporting against the International Strategic Plan 2016-2020, defining what it means to be in 'partnership' and how and when these partnerships are most feasible/beneficial will be key.

Building & Retaining Capacity

Action Against Hunger relies heavily on its own staff, as opposed to volunteers or partner organizations, to carry out its operations. Section Six of the International Strategic Plan for 2016-2020 aims to create 'a more effective organization', including targets for '50 per cent of all vacancies [to be] filled by internal candidates', and to increase the average stay with Action Against Hunger by 35 per cent. Regarding the later, both the evaluations and interviews highlighted that often national staff actually do remain with the organization for a long time. For example, in Somalia[49] the program relies on a pool of highly trained local staff, many of whom have been with Action Against Hunger for over 10 years. The same is true in Afghanistan. In fact, in the context of country missions, we found anecdotally that it is international staff who have a particularly high turnover. This turnover hinders long-term strategy, in particular building national capacity, as it prevents international staff from developing confidence in the capabilities of national staff. This means there is no time to invest in developing an individual's capacity, and promoting them to positions of responsibility.

> "We have to invest in our national teams, we have to build their capacities and we have to give them the space to occupy senior management positions rather than work on the assumption of them never being able to take roles of decision."
>
> Shashwat Saraf
> Regional Operations Director for Asia
> Action Against Hunger France

The assumptions that exist regarding the capabilities and potential of national and international staff need to be broken down. Increasing the contract length of international staff may in fact help us to build national capacity by creating consistency and an environment focused on professional development and skill-sharing.

This links to the idea of investing in networking and negotiation in order to ensure access to populations in need. Even after years of service, there will always be a limit to what international staff can contribute in terms of opening and maintaining a dialogue with non-state armed groups, communities and community leaders. In the Sahel, the independent evaluation highlighted that an example of best practice was the employment of local staff, whose knowledge of the local language and culture was invaluable in facilitating safe delivery of the project.

Finally, it was raised during the interviews that funding mechanisms also inhibit long-term strategy and investment in building national capacity. Often, funding is directly in short, six to twelve month allocations which inhibits country directors and management from being able to plan ahead. This makes both long term strategic programming, and managing and developing human resources more difficult.

Data & Quality Control

Collecting data in fragile states can be made difficult based on the contexts of the operations, such as in 2013 in the Central African Republic where the escalating conflict led to constraints on coverage and frequency of data collection[50]. One obstacle to how data collection is undertaken in fragile states is the strength of governance within that country.

> "A more stable and less suspicious environment is more conducive to being able to collect good data, than one where there is significant state control or state suspicion, and a dynamic conflict setting."
>
> Christopher Lockyear
> Director of Operations
> Action Against Hunger USA

Fragile states with strong governments pose challenges not present in those states where governance is weak. In Pakistan, the government is strict in terms of how data is collected and shared because of past instances where INGOs have had a role in sharing information with international forces, which had an impact on how the government is perceived. In Ethiopia, the government has strict protocols for data collection, similar to non-fragile states like India, as the governments do not want to be perceived negatively based on the findings the data brings to light. While governments can be skeptical of data collection, in other cases it is non-state armed groups who are. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab had strong concerns when Action Against Hunger did surveys using technology such as GPS, thinking that the government or international community could use it against them. In some instances, data collection was not permitted, and Action Against Hunger had to comply with Al-Shabaab.
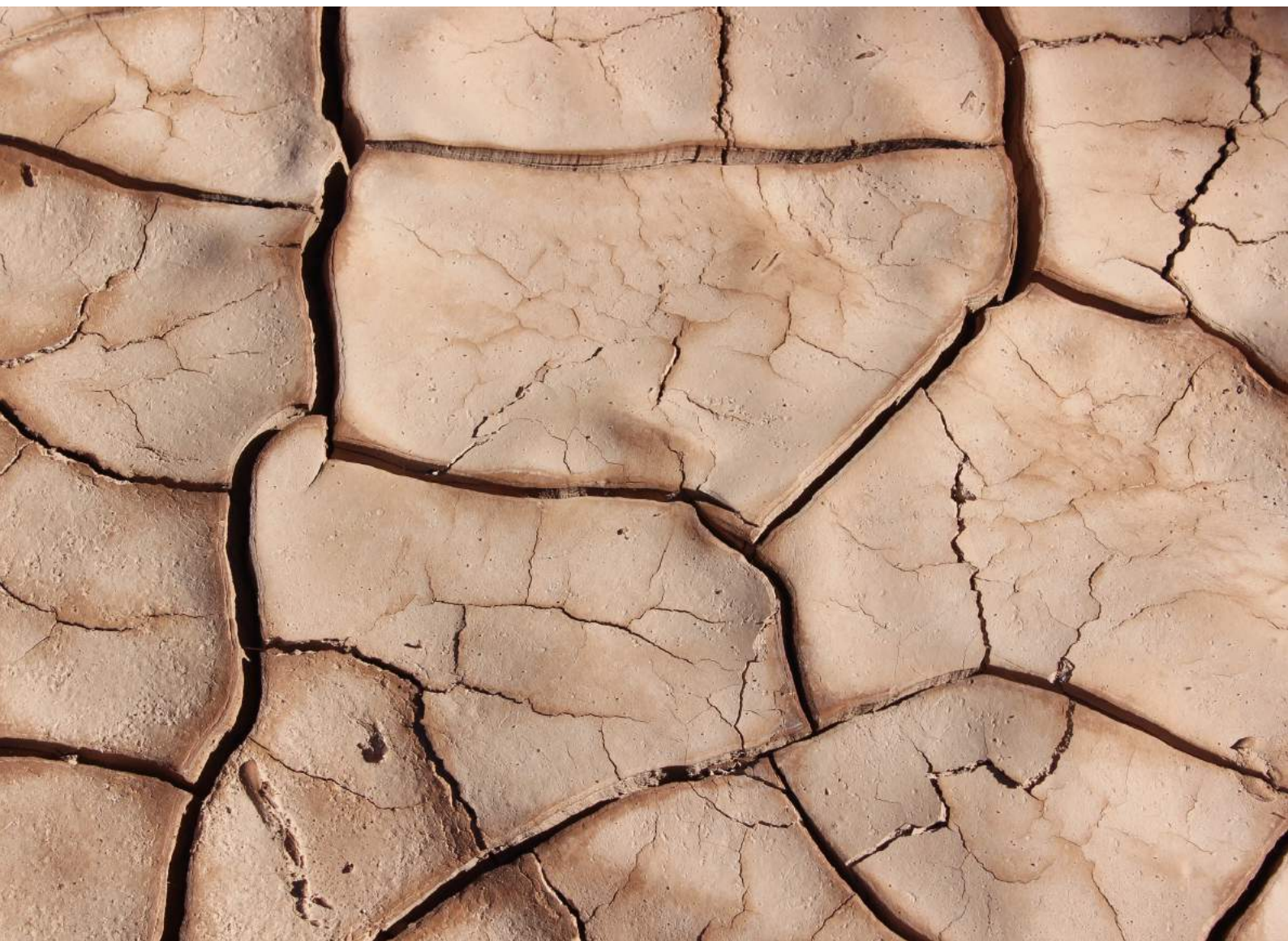
On the other hand, Action Against Hunger has been successful in mitigating the impact that remote managing programs has had on data collection and quality control. In Syria, field visits were used as a means of monitoring, but additionally GPS and photographs, process monitoring and procurement plans were used when direct access was not possible[51]. Access also plays a role in the amount and quality of data the organization gets.

In Yemen, Action Against Hunger had trained some members of staff in SMART analysis, but due to insecurity, it was impossible to conduct any meaningful and random sampling, as security protocols stopped staff from conducting field work. This is similar to work done in Yemen, where the organization trained a number of key water, sanitation and hygiene informants to act as a relay of information from the community upwards towards Action Against Hunger, especially in the case of humanitarian alerts to allow the organization to provide a timely response[52].

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

Action Against Hunger's work in fragile states is extensive, but the states themselves vary greatly in the things that make them challenging. In this sense, it is hard to draw lessons learned that are applicable to all contexts. However, the table below highlights some of the common themes that were uncovered in both our desk review and interviews.

Furthermore, and in order to continue learning from our already extensive experience, we recommend that a system be put in place in order to formalize our learning in fragile states. Within this, we should be clear on our definitions (such as partners and partnerships) to make the learning applicable and relatable. At present, there is no common space for missions to share how they have overcome specific issues related to (for example) access, or building capacity, in a fragile states context. We recommend that making this learning easily accessible to all country missions will be key in ensuring that the lessons learned can influence our programming worldwide and improve our operations going forward.

Looking to the Past, to Learn for the Future

	Lessons Learned	Recommendations
Principled Action	Principled action and programming strengthens our reputation and allows us access to vulnerable populations. Aligning too closely with either state or non-state actors can compromise our neutrality and impartiality	Ensure that our programming remains principled, in that it is impartial, neutral and independent. Maintain transparency about our operations, and reason for working where we do, in order to strengthen our reputation
Access & Security	The organization has had real success with remote management in fragile contexts Negotiations with various parties have not always proved fruitful, but often grant us access to those most in need	Continue to improve remote management of programmes in insecure environments In each fragile context invest resources and time in a few negotiators who are able sustain dialogue with all sides.
Partnerships & Collaboration	Operating in country for prolonged periods, including before and after a crisis, strengthens our operations relationships with collaborators and partners At times, Action Against Hunger could do more to involve collaborators and partners in the design phase of a project, capitalizing on their expertise of the context	Continue working on preparedness and resilience in order to build and establish mutual relationships and a shared vision Utilize collaborators and partnerships from early on in the design phase of a project (and utilize the partnership guidance and toolkit), in order to ensure programming is appropriate and effective
Building & Retaining Capacity	Building the capacity of national staff in order for them to reach senior positions is not always prioritized The high turnover of international staff prevents this investment from occurring Shorter-term funding inhibits country missions ability to plan ahead with regard to both programming and building capacity	Promote an organizational cultural which prioritizes investment in national staff and their promotion Invest in international staff who remain in-country for longer Advocate with donors for longer term funding which allows for strategic planning over 2-5 years
Data & Quality Control	Insecurity has sometimes limited the gathering of data, or has led to the loss of data gathered. Strong states have their own challenges regarding data due to bureaucracy and issues regarding data sharing	Some provisions should be made for the alternative means of collecting data during periods of heightened civil insecurity. Work with governments to understand their data gathering policies, and take the time to explain clearly what it is done for and who it will be shared with. Have multiple methods of collection, either direct or indirect, to ensure the possibility of having some data even in extreme contexts.

Conclusion

Action Against Hunger has been working in fragile states for nearly forty years. This report was intended as a retrospection on our past experiences and an examination of how we can operate more effectively in the future. By reflecting on our programming experience, we can learn from past failures and build upon our strengths. By using foresight analysis, we can plan for how to strategically apply our programming to promote 'a world free from hunger'. The foresight analysis presented possible future scenarios that can assist in the development of strategic planning for a range of eventualities. The scenarios were based on the likely evolution of the key drivers of state fragility, identified by the structural analysis. These drivers also represent good leverage points for affecting positive change in the system of factors contributing to state fragility. The reflective analysis, on Action Against Hunger's work in these contexts, highlighted five common themes that affect our ability to build resilience among vulnerable populations. By applying these strengths to the drivers of state fragility, we can bring about meaningful structural changes.

The following table provides examples of how Action Against Hunger's strengths working in fragile states can be applied to addressing the key drivers of state fragility.

State fragility continues to be the primary context in which international humanitarian organizations work. Conflict, weak institutions, and the inability to provide basic services are some of the most pressing challenges these settings present. By analyzing how the system of factors drives leads state fragility, we develop strategic planning. By reflecting on our experiences in fragile states, we can improve our operations. By bringing together past lessons and future strategy, we can develop effective programming to meet the needs of today.

AAH's area of strength	Driver of fragility	Examples
Partnerships and Collaboration	Conflict and Regional Conflict Dynamics	Maintaining relationships with both state and non-state actors and investing in specialized negotiators
Access and Security	Displaced Persons	Providing assistance and protection Working with local and regional partners to ensure access to displaced persons.
Principled Action	Social Inclusion	Ensure programming goes to assisting all vulnerable populations Impartiality to gain access to out-groups
Data and Quality Control	Access to Basic Services	Data collection and analysis to meet the needs of vulnerable populations. Proactive, not reactive, programming.
Building and Retaining Capacity	Institutional Sustainability	Develop the national capacity of staff as part of long term effort to develop the institutional capacity of host countries.

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