

# A Partnership with Fragile States:

## Lessons from the Belgian development cooperation in the Great Lakes Region

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With the deadline of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaching, the world is preparing for a new set of international goals. Important progress in fields such as education, poverty eradication and water supply has been made in many countries during the last fifteen years. Nevertheless, some countries have fallen far behind the achievement of these goals.<sup>1</sup> Many of these countries are considered by development experts to be “fragile states” because their state institutions are weak and lack legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

Fragile states are characterized by governments that do not have the means or the will to provide essential services to their population. They often have a history of armed conflict and/or coup d'états and are vulnerable to internal and external threats.

In international development cooperation, awareness has grown regarding the necessity for

a differentiated and adapted approach for these states. In 2007, the OECD launched a set of 10 “Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States” (Box One). Subsequently, by the end of 2011, a “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States” was agreed upon by a larger group of states — including a score of fragile states themselves — during the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness.

Belgium is a donor country that has a long history of engagement with fragile states, particularly in the Great Lakes Region in the heart of Africa. Almost half of the Belgian aid budget goes to fragile states. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda are the three largest recipients of Belgian aid overall. Not surprisingly, Belgium was one of the countries that endorsed the OECD's principles and signed the New Deal for engagement in fragile states. It also drafted

### Box 1 OECD Principles for Good International Engagement In Fragile States & Situations

1. Take context as the starting point.
2. Do no harm.
3. Focus on state-building as the central objective.
4. Prioritise prevention.
5. Recognise the links between political, security and development objectives.
6. Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies.
7. Align with local priorities in different ways in different contexts.
8. Agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors.
9. Act fast... but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance.
10. Avoid pockets of exclusion.

its own “Strategic Note on Fragile Situations” in 2013,<sup>3</sup> which was largely a synthesis of the international principles.

A May 2014 study by the Flemish coalition of development NGOs, 11.11.11, and the research institute IPIS, shows that a gap exists between the international and Belgian principles on engagement in fragile states on the one hand, and the practice of the Belgian development cooperation in the field on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> Without going into the details of these principles, this article will present some of the recommendations of the 11.11.11 report for (bilateral) development actors that can help to close the gap between theory and practice in fragile states.

## **Prepare well and involve all relevant actors**

In fragile states, the central authorities often lack legitimacy or the capacity to define strategies and priorities and to implement them. Therefore, and in order to respect the aid effectiveness principle of ownership, a broad consultation of different actors is necessary when programming new development strategies and interventions. Although Belgian development cooperation already does make efforts to involve local populations during the preparation of its interventions, these consultations tend to focus on elites, even within local groups. In one case, although they were very happy with the new school in their village, local farmer representatives said that it was “like it fell from the sky,” as they had not been informed or involved in the project. Reaching out to the broader population might not be an easy job, but it is a necessary one. It avoids the existence of “aid orphan” groups that are and feel excluded from aid, a phenomenon that might disturb the already vulnerable social contract in fragile states. Moreover, involving the local population contributes to their ownership of the intervention and to its sustainability. Involving civil society is one way to a more comprehensive approach.

A good knowledge of the context and of existing conflict dynamics is necessary in order to prepare a development intervention. A good context analysis helps donors avoid inadvertently fuelling existing tensions related to land, power, identity, natural resources, and other local issues. This process relates to the so-called “do no harm” principle. Conducting a profound conflict risk analysis, especially when engaging in war-torn areas such as parts of eastern Congo, is highly recommended. Such analysis would include consultation with existing expertise, which is present in local civil society and in international actors such as UN peacekeeping missions.

In the Belgian case, broader context analyses are carried out, but their impact on intervention strategies is rather weak. In one example, useful studies on the sectoral governance environment were only carried out after the cooperation programme with DRC had already been signed.

In addition to context analysis, it is important to integrate in new strategies good practices from previous interventions. Therefore, a good evaluation policy, internal information sharing, stocktaking and exchange of good practices among donors, are all essential. Too often, this does not happen, or even if information on previous good practices is available, it is not taken into account in new interventions, due to political, time-linked and procedural constraints.

## **Engage in sensitive sectors**

Belgium — along with other donors — tend to prefer engagements in traditional socio-economic sectors such as healthcare, agriculture and infrastructure. These sectors give a higher visibility to the donor’s interventions and its results, allow quicker spending, and generally limit the risk of interventions causing political tensions between the donor and recipient country.

Belgian development cooperation does recognize state-building as an important priority and defines it as a transversal theme for its cooperation initiatives, which means that it is not considered to be a sector in itself, but rather must be integrated in all different intervention sectors. Although the transversal integration of governance issues in the Belgian development interventions in sectors such as health or agriculture is laudable, the transversal focus leads in practice to relatively low budgets for specific state-building interventions. In 2012, Belgium spent less on support for government and civil society in fragile states, than it did in its non-fragile partner countries.

In fragile states, such as the partner countries of Belgium in the Great Lakes Region, more efforts are needed in sectors such as justice, security and state-building. These are difficult sectors, ones that are politically sensitive, where results are often intangible, and where it is hard to spend large amounts of money in a short time. However, to address vulnerability, lack of legitimacy and risks of conflict in fragile states, it is essential to work on the foundations of these states and to invest more in these sectors. Often Belgium makes the right analysis in its partner countries, especially in the Great Lakes Region, but it does not act accordingly by translating this analysis into its intervention priorities. A 2013 evaluation in Burundi even talked about a “particularly flagrant” gap between the analysis of causes of conflict and the Belgian priorities.<sup>5</sup>

## **Engage politically to resolve political problems**

In fragile states, development cooperation has a significant political dimension, to a much larger extent than more resilient developing countries.

This holds true even when intervening in more “technical sectors.” Belgian agriculture programmes in DRC, for example, are anchored at the provincial level, which has important competencies in that field since decentralization is enshrined in the Congolese constitution. In practice, however the decentralization process falters, giving the provinces neither the means nor the staff needed to take up their new responsibilities, with dire consequences on the capacity of the provincial authorities to reform and improve agriculture in their province. Such issues are major hurdles for effective development interventions and have to be tackled in a more politically savvy way, including through a political dialogue with Congolese authorities to stimulate improvement and reforms. Even a mere technical intervention in the agricultural sectors always has a political character.

While interventions in such “technical” sectors have a political dimension that is difficult to ignore, investment in sensitive sectors entails an even bigger need to engage politically. Interventions in sectors such as public sector reform, justice, and security sector reform are not possible without a political engagement from the donor side. An evolution towards stronger awareness and action based on political considerations in the world of development cooperation seems inevitable. This approach definitely does not mean that development cooperation should serve donor diplomatic interests, but rather that interventions should take into account and deal with power relations and political economy.

For now, Belgian development cooperation is not yet sensitive to such a political approach, and tends to prefer “technical” solutions, although there seems to be a growing consciousness. A more political approach is only possible if policy makers are willing to bear the risk of potentially

more difficult relations with the partner government.

Political dialogue is an important instrument in such a political engagement. Since governments of fragile states often lack democratic legitimacy, this dialogue should be pursued at different levels: national, regional, provincial and local levels. Moreover, involving civil society in this dialogue and coordinating with other donors, such as more 'neutral' UN agencies, can help to enhance its legitimacy and effectiveness.

In the DRC, the political dialogue between Belgium and the Congolese authorities was complemented by a roadmap aiming to improve governance in the sectors important for Belgian development cooperation. This roadmap, with commitments from each party, has been agreed upon by Belgian and Congolese authorities and has been followed-up jointly. Mutual benchmarks provide common ground and can help to improve dialogue and cooperation between donor and partner countries. Belgium is now expanding this approach to sub-national levels and is enhancing coordination with other donors on these issues.

In order to step up their political engagement in fragile states, donors should also try to enhance internal policy coordination. In the case of Belgium, interventions are executed by the development agency, BTC, while political dialogue is carried out by representatives of the development cooperation department (DGD) of the Belgian administration. Collaboration between these two institutions has not always been very smooth. As a result, important lessons from practice at the field level did not always affect the content of political dialogue. A closer collaboration between executing agencies and ministries is necessary in a more political approach of development cooperation.

Finally, a more political approach to development can be improved by providing more support to local civil society organizations (CSOs). For example, supporting CSOs that monitor corruption could help to improve a government's accountability. It is therefore important to ensure sufficient support for relevant CSOs in each sector of intervention or even in individual programmes.

## Stay long enough

Working to improve the foundations of fragile states requires a long-term engagement. According to the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*, it takes one generation to create legitimate institutions and to get a fragile state on a path towards a functioning institutionalized state. Although this estimation seems to be rather optimistic, the message is clear: it takes time to overcome fragility.

According to the OECD's fragile state principles, donors should stay engaged long enough; but at the same time, they also suggest that donors act fast in order to create "peace dividends". According to this logic, local needs in post-conflict situations are so urgent that populations should be offered quick and visible results in order to gain confidence. Several cautions have to be made. Firstly, quick results might create high expectations. The long time period between public declarations and long-term achievements might lead to greater frustration among the population. A second problem with quick visible results is they might perpetuate a relationship-dependency between the population and the donor. Instead of focusing their demands towards the local authorities, they might continue to knock on the donor's door. These issues and dilemmas require a sensitive and synergistic balance between short and long-term needs that will be unique to each local context.

A strong focus on the sustainability of intervention is necessary. Due to the general weakness of fragile states, there is a high risk that government institutions and local populations do not assume the responsibilities to sustain the outcomes of development interventions once they end. Most of the interventions of Belgian development cooperation do not last longer than four years. Possible solution would include prolonging the duration of interventions, stimulating ownership from the beginning of the projects and improving the follow-up of past interventions, including with a specific budget for these purposes.

## Conclusion

With the deadline of the MDGs approaching, more effort is needed to foster progress in fragile states. In order to overcome fragility, efforts should be focused on the state's "fundamentals." Particular attention is needed for sectors such as justice, state-building and security sector reform. As these sectors are more "sensitive" and more political than more traditional sectors, donors engaging in these sectors should accept that results are less tangible, that quick spending is not an option, and that difficulties can arise in the donor-partner country relationship.

Whether intervening in traditional or more sensitive sectors in fragile states, there is a high chance of involvement in political issues. Technical measures often do not provide a sufficient solution and there is no such thing as "nonpolitical" or "apolitical" development cooperation. On the contrary:

strong political savviness and engagement from the donor's side is necessary. However, this more political approach definitely does not mean that development cooperation should serve the donor's diplomatic interests.

The volatile nature of social and political contexts in fragile states makes an extensive context analysis indispensable in preparing interventions. Due to the limited legitimacy of fragile state governments, donors should try to involve a broad spectrum of actors in the preparation of their strategies, including civil society and international actors. Finally, progress in fragile states is slow, and therefore donors should engage long enough to give durable progress a chance.

## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.cgdev.org/page/mdg-progress-index-gauging-country-level-achievements>.
- 2 The International Network on Conflict and Fragility that unifies donors that engage in fragile states, provides a list of fragile states.
- 3 The French version of this strategy is available at [http://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/binaries/note\\_strategique\\_situations\\_de\\_fragilite\\_tcm313-223149.pdf](http://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/binaries/note_strategique_situations_de_fragilite_tcm313-223149.pdf).
- 4 The study is available in French at [http://www.11.be/11/dossiers/artikel/detail/cooperation\\_belge\\_au\\_developpement\\_etats\\_fragiles\\_ecart\\_entre\\_politique\\_pratique,104833](http://www.11.be/11/dossiers/artikel/detail/cooperation_belge_au_developpement_etats_fragiles_ecart_entre_politique_pratique,104833).
- 5 *Société d'Etudes et d'Evaluation, Evaluation conjointe de la coopération de l'Allemagne, de la Belgique, de la Commission européenne, de la France, des Pays-Bas, du Royaume-Uni et de la Suède avec le Burundi, Luxembourg, 19 November 2013.*