Making fragility history

By François Bourguignon* and Giorgia Giovannetti*

Fragility, expressed in terms of weak institutions and poor governance, is slowing development in sub-Saharan Africa. Europe needs to help fragile African states build up their resilience and embark on sustainable development.

Many parts of the developing world – such as East and South Asia and Latin America – have made, and, despite the global crisis, continue to make, significant progress, plucking hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. By contrast, progress in sub-Saharan Africa has long been, at best, lacklustre, at worst, negligible or non-existent. Things might have improved somewhat lately. But it is not clear whether the acceleration of economic growth observed a few years before the crisis was due to a true change of development regime or simply to the global exuberance that preceded the crisis.

One of the main reasons identified for this relative lag is that sub-Saharan Africa is home to the largest concentration of 'fragile states' in the world – as many as 30, according to some estimates. Owing to a lack of institutional capacity, poor governance, conflict and other factors, fragile states are unable – and sometimes unwilling – to provide basic public goods and services, such as access to safe drinking water and primary healthcare, let alone make the most of sustainable development opportunities.

"The continued existence of large numbers of fragile states, and the fact that the issue of aid effectiveness in those countries has not been resolved, provides the biggest risk to the successful achievement of the MDGs," as a previous European research paper emphasised. [1]

This situation is further exacerbated by the fallout from the global economic crisis, which has hit several African countries severely in the form of lower commodity export earnings, drops in remittances from diaspora communities, not to mention falling foreign direct investment and aid commitments. Furthermore, as we reflect over the failure at Copenhagen to reach a post-Kyoto global climate accord, it is important to recall that climate change is most likely to have a disproportionate effect on African countries, further aggravating their vulnerability.

In order to face up to this challenge and identify the best approaches to dealing with development in the context of fragility, the EU dedicated its first-ever European Report on Development (ERD) to this very topic.

The ERD identifies a number of root causes and consequences of fragility. Most importantly, countries in situation of fragility are exposed to poor governance, which in turn leads to the

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[1] Francois Bourguignon et al. 'Millennium Development Goals at Midpoint: Where do we stand and where do we need to go?' September 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/mdg_paper_final_20080916_en.pdf.

worst forms of violation of basic human rights, such as food insecurity and conflicts, and in some cases organised crime and illicit trafficking. Moreover, fragility is contagious and fragile states are bad neighbours, as negative spillover effects, such as instability, lower growth, diseases, refugees, trafficking, and smuggling spread rapidly. For these countries, an emergency situation is the rule, not an exception.

Despite some common factors, it is important to note that each fragile country is unique and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ formula for reform or sustainable development. In fact, the ERD steers clear of providing hard and fast policy prescriptions and, instead, opens up new avenues to encourage the EU and other donors, on the one hand, and fragile states, on the other, to rethink how they do development and their relationship with one another.

‘Resilience’, the conceptual opposite of fragility, is a core concept explored by the ERD. Resilience reflects a society’s capacity and ability to adapt to change, so enhancing the resilience of fragile countries first involves boosting the capacity of both informal and formal institutions to overcome shocks. The report identifies a number of local resilience mechanisms that can be built upon and developed further. These include social protection, micro-finance, insurance mechanisms and counter-cyclical aid, i.e. assistance that rises as the economic cycle begins to dip. At a time when many fragile countries are being hit by major shocks and aid flows are generally falling because of the global crisis, this is a message to ponder.

Yet fragility and sustainable development need to be handled simultaneously. In this perspective, local ownership of the development process and strategies to improve overall governance is crucial. Yet, the EU is well-placed to help make a difference, as the ERD points out. This is because the Union is no mere development agency but is a political actor which deals with the whole spectrum of policies – from security and trade, to health and education – that can help fragile countries move towards stability.

The report focuses on five key priority areas for long-term EU engagement: striking a balance between short-term needs and long-term policies; enhancing human and social capital; supporting state-building and social cohesion; facilitating better regional governance; and improving security.

But for Europe to make the most of its position requires it to reassess its international role by not only coordinating its policies and actions more closely, but also speaking more with a single voice and narrowing the gap between theoretical policy frameworks and their practical implementation.

What we and our African partners decide to do in the coming years will be crucial for the 21st century not to represent another ‘lost opportunity’ for sub-Saharan Africa.

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François Bourguignon is director of the Paris School of Economics. Prior to that, he was chief economist at the World Bank where he played a pivotal role in placing economic growth and its relationship with inequality and poverty at the heart of the bank's agenda.

Giorgia Giovannetti is professor of Economics at the University of Firenze and European University Institute and the team leader of the European Report on Development. She has directed the research centre of the Italian Institute for Foreign Trade.