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The fragility paradox

Why building more institutions does not
always build a stronger state



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What this paper argues

- International actors have become good at building the visible machinery of government in fragile states — ministries, financial systems, legislation, regulators, digital platforms, trained professionals. Yet states acquire institutions without reliably becoming less fragile.

- The reason lies partly in how fragility is understood. Treated as an accumulation of deficits, it invites a response that supplies the missing pieces. But **fragile states are not strong states with pieces missing**. They are political systems in which authority, resources, legitimacy and coercive power are distributed differently.

- Where formal government is weak, governance does not stop. Disputes are settled, contracts enforced, security organised, revenue collected and rules applied — by customary authorities, businesses, armed actors, religious institutions, diaspora networks and aid agencies. A fragile state is rarely a vacuum; it is a crowded market of competing authorities.

- This is the fragility paradox: the institutions of the state can become stronger on paper while the political foundations of the state remain weak. It explains how technically successful governance programmes coexist with persistent fragility.

- What is called an implementation gap is sometimes an equilibrium. Ambiguity, overlapping mandates and unenforced rules can serve competing interests. The question preceding technical assistance should be who would gain and who would lose if the reform were actually implemented.

- Aid is inside the political system it analyses. Salaries, contracts, parallel units, information and status all change incentives. How aid is delivered is itself a governance intervention, whether or not it is designed as one.

- Fragility is often relational rather than organisational — located between centre and region, state and taxpayer, police and community, government and international agencies. The unit of analysis for institution-building should often be the relationship, not the organisation.

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Who this is for	Donors, agencies, governments and implementing organisations designing governance and institution-building programmes in fragile settings.
What it covers	Why institutional form and performance diverge, and what would have to change in how governance programmes are diagnosed, designed and judged.
What it is not	An evaluation of any programme, partner or government, and not an argument against technical assistance. It argues where technical assistance sits in a theory of change.

The fragility paradox

Over the past three decades, international actors have become considerably better at building the visible machinery of government in fragile states. They can finance ministries, train civil servants, digitise services, develop public financial management systems, draft legislation, establish anti-corruption bodies, create regulatory authorities and produce national strategies. Yet one of the central puzzles of contemporary development remains unresolved: why do states sometimes acquire more institutions without becoming significantly less fragile?

Part of the answer lies in how fragility is understood. Too often it is approached as an accumulation of deficits — insufficient capacity, weak institutions, inadequate legislation, limited resources, poor service delivery — and the corresponding response appears logical: supply the missing capacity, institutions, laws, finance and expertise.

Fragile states are not strong states with pieces missing. They are political systems in which authority, resources, legitimacy and coercive power are distributed differently.

That distinction changes everything. In many fragile settings the formal state exists alongside — and negotiates constantly with — informal political networks, traditional authorities, armed actors, businesses, religious institutions, humanitarian organisations, international agencies, local communities and external governments. The practical question is therefore not whether the state has an institution responsible for taxation, justice, security or service delivery. It is who actually exercises authority, who controls resources, who can enforce decisions, who provides services, who commands trust, and what incentives keep that arrangement in place.

This paper calls the consequence the fragility paradox: **the institutions of the state can become stronger on paper while the political foundations of the state remain weak**. That helps explain how technically successful governance programmes coexist with persistent political fragility, and it suggests a different starting point. Rather than asking first what institutional capacity is missing, partners should ask what political settlement, incentives and relationships are producing the institutional weakness they observe. This is not an argument against institution-building. It is an argument for understanding how institutions actually become institutions.

How this paper was prepared

This is an argument paper. It draws on Radar Consultancy's advisory, evaluation and research work in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Yemen, and on the published governance and fragility literature listed in the references. It presents no new primary research and evaluates no individual programme.

The world does not lack governance programmes

Fragility is neither marginal nor temporary. The OECD's multidimensional framework assesses 177 contexts and identifies 61 as experiencing high or extreme fragility — 43 high and 18 extreme. Those contexts hold about a quarter of the world's population but 72 per cent of its extreme poor, and on the report's projections that share could reach 92 per cent by 2040 (OECD, 2025).

61

contexts in high or extreme fragility, of 177 assessed (OECD, 2025)

2.1bn

people living in them, about 25 per cent of the world's population

72%

of the world's extreme poor, on 2024 figures

Nor is the condition transitional. The World Bank reports that nearly three-quarters of economies classified as fragile and conflict-affected have remained so for over a decade (World Bank, 2025), and the number of such economies rose from 32 in 2012 to 39 in 2024 (World Bank IEG, 2024). Of the 61 OECD contexts, 24 are experiencing armed conflict and eight are in a state of war (OECD, 2025).

The international community has not ignored these places. Billions have been spent on governance, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, public administration, elections, justice, security, decentralisation, civil society and economic reform. But the aid picture is less straightforward than volume alone suggests: the share of DAC members' country-allocable official development assistance going to contexts with high and extreme fragility was the lowest in two decades in 2022 and 2023 (OECD, 2025).

THE QUESTION THIS PAPER STARTS FROM

The interesting question is not only why fragile countries receive insufficient assistance. It is why so much intervention has produced such uneven institutional transformation — and whether the answer is really that fragile states require more of the same.

Fragility is not an empty space

One of the most persistent mistakes in international intervention is to treat weakness of formal government as absence of governance. Where formal government is weak, society does not stop functioning. People still settle disputes. Businesses still enforce contracts. Communities still organise security. Money moves, property is protected or contested, resources are allocated, leaders emerge, taxes and rents are collected. Rules exist. Authority exists. What changes is who performs these functions, and on what basis.

The function	Who may perform it
• Dispute resolution • Infrastructure and utilities • Health, education, social protection • Access to public resources • Taxation of territory and trade • Community investment	• Customary authorities, often faster than courts • Businesses, where the state has not built • Humanitarian organisations, at scale and for years • Local political networks and gatekeepers • Armed organisations, and informal levies • Diaspora networks and religious institutions

These arrangements can be inclusive or exclusionary, peaceful or coercive, effective or predatory. They should not be romanticised. But neither should they be analytically ignored, because they constitute the environment any new public institution has to enter.

A fragile state is rarely an institutional vacuum. It is more often an overcrowded political marketplace of competing authorities.

That has a practical consequence which conventional programming rarely accounts for: establishing a formal institution does not add capability to an empty space. It inserts a new claimant into an existing distribution of authority and revenue — and the actors already performing the function will respond.

The problem with the word 'capacity'

Imagine a ministry that repeatedly fails to implement policy. A conventional assessment concludes that capacity is weak. Consultants are recruited, officials trained, a strategy produced, equipment purchased, procedures written, perhaps a digital platform installed. Two years later implementation remains weak, and a further assessment concludes that capacity remains weak.

But what if capacity was never the principal constraint?

Budget	The ministry does not control the money attached to its mandate.
Mandate	Another institution contests the function, formally or in practice.
Continuity	Political appointments reset leadership before reform can land.
Incentives	Officials have little reason to implement the reform, and some reason not to.
Interests	Informal actors benefit from the existing arrangement.
Territory	Local authorities reject decisions taken centrally.
Compliance	Citizens have little reason to comply, and no cost if they do not.
Partners	International actors themselves bypass the institution, because doing so produces faster results.

Training cannot solve any of these. This is why the language of capacity building sometimes obscures more than it reveals. The criticism is not new: governance research has long warned against assuming that administrative weakness has managerial origins, since bureaucracies are embedded in broader political, social and economic interests (IDS, 2005), and the World Bank later made the point explicit in arguing that reform requires looking beyond institutional form towards function, power and incentives (World Bank, 2017).

In fragile states, every apparent capacity problem should first be treated as a hypothesis, not a diagnosis.

Before prescribing training, advisers should establish whether the binding constraint is technical, financial, organisational, political, territorial or relational. The answer determines whether a capacity intervention is the right instrument at all.

Institutions are the outcome of politics, not an alternative to it

Development programmes often speak of politics and institutions as separate worlds. Politics is treated as unstable and problematic; institutions as neutral and technical. But institutions are themselves settlements about power.

A tax authority	determines who must surrender resources to the state.
A procurement system	determines who can access public contracts.
A decentralisation law	determines where authority sits.
A land registry	determines whose claims the state recognises.
A police service	determines who can legitimately use coercion.
A budget	determines whose needs receive public resources.

These are technical systems. They are also political arrangements, which is why copying the organisational appearance of a successful institution rarely reproduces the political conditions that made it work. Governance research made this criticism of assessments that begin with an OECD institutional model and measure developing countries against the gap (IDS, 2005).

The World Bank's *World Development Report 2017* put the underlying mechanism in operational terms. Policy outcomes depend on bargaining among actors with unequal power; who bargains, who is excluded and what blocks entry to the policy arena shape which policies are selected and implemented; and exclusion, capture and clientelism are manifestations of those power asymmetries (World Bank, 2017).

Yet the operational implications of that insight remain uncomfortable, because once governance is understood this way there is rarely a technical shortcut – and technical shortcuts are what programme cycles are built to procure.

The implementation gap may be a political equilibrium

Development organisations frequently describe the difference between policy and practice as an implementation gap. A law exists but is not enforced. A strategy exists but is not implemented. A regulator exists but does not regulate. A decentralisation framework exists but authority remains centralised. The instinct is to close the gap.

Sometimes the gap is not an administrative accident. It is the equilibrium.

THE APPARENT FAILURE	WHO IT MAY SUIT	WHAT CLOSING IT WOULD COST THEM
A regulation that is not enforced	Actors who benefit from selective enforcement	Discretion over who is penalised and who is not
Overlapping institutional mandates	Competing centres of patronage	A protected constituency and its resources
Decentralisation on paper only	Central actors controlling transfers	Budget, appointments and visibility in the regions
Procurement rules alongside informal allocation	Firms and officials inside the informal channel	Predictable access to public contracts
A revenue mandate without collection powers	Those currently taxed informally, and those taxing them	An untaxed or privately taxed base

In these circumstances, implementation failure may represent a workable compromise between competing interests. That does not make the arrangement desirable. It changes the reform problem completely.

The question is not why the government has not implemented the reform. It is who would gain and who would lose if the reform were actually implemented.

That question should precede millions of dollars of technical assistance, and it is cheap to ask. Where the answer is that powerful actors would lose and no coalition exists to defend the change, the programme is not facing an implementation problem that training will fix.

Aid is not outside the political system

Development actors routinely analyse the political economy of the countries in which they work while treating themselves as external observers. They are not. Aid introduces money, employment, contracts, information, status and access to international institutions, and those resources alter incentives. In fragile contexts, where external resources form a large part of the institutional environment, the effect is proportionally larger.

THE DECISION	THE IMMEDIATE JUSTIFICATION	THE INSTITUTIONAL SIDE EFFECT
Paying above government salary scales	Attracting the skills the programme needs	Skilled officials migrate out of government into projects
Establishing a parallel implementation unit	Government procurement is slow and delivery is urgent	Faster delivery now; weaker incentive to fix the public system
Delivering services independently of government	Citizens need assistance that the state cannot provide	Citizens have little reason to demand services from public authority
Collecting and holding the best data in the country	Programme reporting and evidence standards	Government owns policies whose evidence base it does not control

None of these outcomes means the original intervention was wrong. Humanitarian urgency often requires parallel delivery, and a programme that refuses to pay competitive salaries may simply fail. The point is narrower and harder to evade: **how aid is delivered is itself part of governance**, and it should be analysed with the same seriousness that partners apply to the political economy of the government they are advising.

The older governance literature already warned that external resources can alter the relationship between governments and citizens by weakening the incentive to bargain with taxpayers and organised groups (IDS, 2005). In settings where aid constitutes a substantial share of public finance and employment, that warning describes the operating environment rather than a risk at the margin.

The project can succeed while the state loses

A development project and the institution it supports do not necessarily share a definition of success. The two run on different logics, and the divergence is structural rather than a matter of goodwill.

What the project needs • To disburse within the financial year • Measurable outputs within three years • The best people available, hired now • A delivery unit that can produce results • To avoid political risk • An orderly exit on a fixed date	What the institution needs • Sustainable and predictable financing • Fifteen years of incremental development • Those people to remain inside government • Ordinary administrative systems that can deliver • To negotiate political risk, not avoid it • No exit; it continues either way
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The consequence is uncomfortable but straightforward: it is entirely possible for every project indicator to turn green while the underlying institution remains fragile — and for the programme to be evaluated as a success on that basis.

This is one reason governance programmes should measure more than outputs. The question worth adding to a results framework is whether the intervention has altered the distribution of capability, authority, incentives and accountability. That is harder to count, but it is what the programme claims to be doing.

Fragility is fundamentally relational

The strongest conceptual move available here is to stop defining fragility solely as a characteristic of government. Often the weakness exists between actors rather than inside any one of them.

Centre and region	Mandates overlap, transfers are disputed, and implementation stalls between the two.
Government and taxpayers	Collection runs ahead of any explanation of what is owed, why, and what is returned.
Police and communities	Authority is exercised over people who did not confer it and cannot withdraw it.
Regulators and businesses	A capable private sector operates ahead of the rules meant to govern it.
Formal courts and customary justice	Two systems resolve the same disputes on different principles, with unclear precedence.
Elites and excluded populations	Bargaining occurs, but not everyone is in the room where it happens.
Governments and international agencies	Crisis response runs on a separate financing, information and accountability track.

A ministry can become technically stronger without changing any of these relationships — which suggests that the unit of analysis for institution-building should often be the relationship, not the organisation.

Instead of asking only whether the revenue authority has enough trained staff, examine the relationship between taxpayers and the state. Instead of strengthening local government, examine how resources and authority are negotiated between national and subnational institutions. Instead of training police, examine whether communities recognise police authority and whether officers are accountable to them. That moves governance programming from building organisations towards building institutional relationships.

Somalia illustrates both the problem and the possibility

Somalia is useful precisely because it complicates simple theories of fragility. The country experienced prolonged state collapse while Somali society continued developing sophisticated systems of commerce, telecommunications, remittances, community organisation and informal governance. Institutional capability did not disappear; it relocated.

Since the re-establishment of federal institutions, considerable progress has also occurred in public financial management and fiscal governance. Debt relief at the HIPC Completion Point in December 2023 reduced Somalia's external debt from about 64 per cent of GDP at end-2018 to under six per cent at end-2023 (IMF, 2023), and revenue reform has continued since, with the authorities working to have domestic revenue cover operational government spending by 2027 (IMF, 2025).

Somalia therefore demonstrates two things at once. Society can develop substantial institutional capability outside the formal state. And reconstructing the formal state requires connecting that capability to legitimate public authority rather than proceeding as though nothing existed before government returned.

WHY THIS TRAVELS

The specific actors differ across Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan and the Sahel – different balances of customary authority, private capability, armed actors and international presence. The analytical lesson does travel: start with the governance system that actually exists, not the state architecture outsiders expect to find. In OECD terms, the 61 contexts classified together as highly or extremely fragile differ so much internally that a common label is a starting point for analysis rather than a description of a common condition (OECD, 2025).

Stop asking only what is missing

Traditional assessments begin with deficits: no effective regulator, insufficient capacity, weak accountability, limited revenue, poor coordination, incomplete legislation. The inventory is accurate and rarely useful, because it describes the distance to an imagined endpoint rather than the mechanics of the system in front of you.

Reversing the question produces better programmes.

WHAT ALREADY WORKS? WHY DOES IT WORK? WHAT SUSTAINS IT? WHAT WOULD BREAK IT?

Who has an incentive to maintain it?	Identifies the coalition a reform would have to keep on side, or replace.
Who trusts it, and why?	Locates legitimacy, which is the hardest input to manufacture and the easiest to destroy.
Who finances it?	Reveals whether the function survives the withdrawal of any single actor.
Who enforces its rules?	Distinguishes arrangements that are voluntary from those backed by sanction.
What political bargain sustains it?	Explains why it has lasted, and what a reform would be renegotiating.

This does not mean accepting harmful informal institutions. It means understanding before redesigning. A system that looks institutionally imperfect may be performing an important function; a reform that looks technically superior may remove the incentive that made the old arrangement work. Development practice therefore needs to distinguish between institutional appearance and institutional performance.

From best practice to best fit — and beyond

Best fit has become the familiar response to the failures of imported best practice. It is an improvement, and it may still not go far enough. The challenge is not only adapting international models to local circumstances. It is sometimes allowing institutional solutions to emerge from those circumstances.

That requires experimentation, and fragile settings produce it constantly without being asked to. One province develops a workable public-private arrangement. A municipality discovers a locally legitimate revenue bargain. A ministry builds an unusual partnership with business. A community integrates customary and formal dispute resolution. These are institutional facts, not anecdotes.

Institutional transfer • Begins with a model known to work elsewhere • Measures progress as convergence with that model • Standardises early, to permit national roll-out • Treats local variation as implementation noise	Institutional discovery • Begins with an arrangement that works here • Measures progress as performance of the function • Understands first, standardises only when it is understood • Treats local variation as the evidence
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The objective should not immediately be to standardise every successful experiment nationally. It should first be to understand why it works — because scaling an arrangement without its underlying bargain usually reproduces the form and loses the function. Fragile states may therefore require institutional discovery rather than simply institutional transfer.

The political economy of time

There is a mismatch rarely discussed enough. Development time and political time are different, and institutional time is different again.

CLOCK ONE Delivery Citizens need services now. Short-term delivery is not a distraction from institutional work; failing at it removes the standing to attempt anything else.	CLOCK TWO Institutional improvement Systems, procedures and capability develop over five to fifteen years, across several programme cycles and usually several donors.	CLOCK THREE Political durability The much longer process through which political actors acquire reasons to preserve those institutions rather than capture or bypass them.
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Projects operate in 24-, 36- or 60-month cycles. Institutional change can take generations. Political coalitions can change overnight, and conflict can destroy ten years of institutional progress in weeks. Fragile states therefore require programmes capable of operating across several clocks at once, and of being judged on each differently.

The OECD’s analysis reinforces the persistence of the problem: fragility is multidimensional — economic, environmental, political, security, societal and human — and countries remain in it for long periods, with risks in each dimension interacting (OECD, 2025). A five-year programme cannot solve that. It can, however, strengthen or weaken the direction of institutional travel, which is a more realistic standard than the one usually applied.

A new test for governance programmes

Radar proposes that major governance and institution-building interventions in fragile settings answer five questions before implementation begins.

01 Function. What problem are we actually trying to solve — not which institution we want to create, but which public function needs to work?	02 Power. Who benefits from the present arrangement, and whose authority, income or influence changes if reform succeeds?
03 Incentives. Why would the relevant actors sustain the new arrangement once external pressure and financing disappear?	04 Relationship. Which relationship must change for the institution to work — government and citizen, centre and region, regulator and business, politician and bureaucrat, state and community?
05 Exit. What remains when international money, consultants and implementation structures leave?	
A programme unable to answer these questions may still deliver activities, and those activities may be worth financing. It cannot confidently claim to be building institutions.	

What this means for donors

This argument does not require abandoning governance assistance. It requires becoming considerably more demanding about what governance assistance means.

Technical assistance	should continue where the constraint is genuinely technical.
Training	should continue where skills are genuinely missing.
Digitalisation	should continue where technology solves a real administrative problem.
Legislation	should be supported where rules are absent or inadequate.
But none of them	should be mistaken automatically for institutional reform.

The operational implication is that political economy analysis should stop being a document produced at inception and forgotten during implementation. It should become a management function. When political incentives change, programmes should change. When an institutional reform begins producing unintended consequences, programmes should be able to adapt. When locally developed arrangements outperform imported models, donors should have enough flexibility to support them.

THE HARD PART IS INSTITUTIONAL, NOT ANALYTICAL

Each of these requires something difficult for development bureaucracies: the ability to admit that the original programme design may have been wrong. Most of the analytical tools already exist. What is usually missing is the authorisation to act on what they produce, and the tolerance for a mid-course correction that reads, on a results framework, as failure.

The state is not **its organisational chart**

For thirty years, international development has become increasingly sophisticated at constructing the visible architecture of government. Fragile states now contain ministries, commissions, strategies, legislation, development plans, regulatory agencies, digital platforms and trained professionals that did not exist before. These achievements matter.

But the presence of institutions should not be confused with institutionalisation. A functioning state depends on something less visible: whether political actors have incentives to obey rules; whether citizens recognise public authority; whether governments can raise and allocate resources; whether competing interests can bargain without violence; whether public institutions can make credible commitments; and whether the rules survive beyond the individuals and international projects that created them.

Fragility is not merely what a state lacks. It is how power works. That is why it cannot be solved by filling institutional gaps, and why the next generation of governance reform should spend less time asking how to make institutions look stronger and more time understanding what would make political actors need those institutions to work.

The challenge for 2026 is therefore no longer primarily conceptual. The World Bank emphasises functions, power asymmetries and incentives (World Bank, 2017); the OECD treats fragility as multidimensional and persistent rather than a simple institutional deficiency (OECD, 2025). We know that politics matters.

The challenge is operational: are development organisations prepared to design programmes as though it does?

A NOTE ON SCOPE

This paper argues a position. It generalises across contexts that differ from one another in important ways, and it evaluates no individual programme, partner or government. Statistics are drawn from the published sources listed in the references and are subject to revision. Radar welcomes correction and disagreement, particularly from institutions in the contexts described here.

Sources cited

Sources are given in author–date form. Figures were current at the time of writing and should be checked against the most recent edition of each publication before republication.

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BEFORE PUBLICATION

Two references in the underlying draft could not be verified and have been left out of this version: an aid volume figure for fragile contexts in 2023, and a World Bank country strategy formulation for Somalia. If either is to be used, add the publication, author and date here and cite it in the text.

ABOUT RADAR CONSULTANCY

Radar Consultancy is an advisory, research and technical services firm working across Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen, with a permanent office in Mogadishu and locally registered entities in Kenya and South Sudan. Our work spans research and political economy analysis, monitoring and evaluation, data governance and protection, strategy design, stabilisation and peacebuilding, and institutional capacity development.

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For a briefing on the argument, or its application to a specific portfolio or country programme, contact the Mogadishu office.

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