

## GLOBAL INSIGHTS

# Knights in Fragile Armor: The Rise of the “G7+”



*Vanessa Wyeth*

GLOBALLY, 1.5 BILLION PEOPLE LIVE IN COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY VIOLENT conflict. International aid to fragile and conflict-affected states accounts for 30 percent of global official development assistance (ODA) flows. However, no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet to achieve a single Millennium Development Goal (MDG). For the first time, a group of these countries have joined together to discuss their shared development challenges and advocate for better international policies to address their needs. Calling themselves the “g7+,” this group represents an important new voice in the debate over aid effectiveness and it carries high expectations. This article describes the rise of the g7+ and attempts to answer the question on everyone’s mind: Can it deliver?

Recent years have witnessed a new criticism of the international aid architecture and its shortcomings in addressing the challenges posed by state fragility. Attention has shifted from hard targets in terms of percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) spent on official development assistance, and even the MDG targets, to the overall effectiveness of international development efforts. Critics have pointed to persistent shortcomings in the way that international assistance is delivered, particularly in problems of will and attention, lack of engagement with national stakeholders, aversion to risk, inflexible and cumbersome financing mechanisms, opaque decisionmaking processes, lack of country ownership, and a distressing lack of coherence and coordination among international actors. The potential for donor assistance to have the unintended effect of undermining, rather than bolstering, state capacity and legitimacy is now widely recognized. International actors have been faulted for applying cookie-cutter approaches to complex problems in vastly diverse environments, even as thinking on the challenges posed by conflict and fragility has evolved.

In the past several years, there have been a number of milestones in seeking a structured international response to the failures of development assistance to meet challenges of fragility. Building on the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, in 2007 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries endorsed a set of Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations (the Fragile States Principles) to

guide aid to fragile states. However, these were top-down reform efforts: despite the good thinking that underpinned the Fragile States Principles, they were created by donors, for donors. Much like the Washington Consensus, which governed development policy in the 1980s, the early discourse on aid effectiveness largely consisted of outsiders diagnosing the problem, prescribing the solution, and assuming responsibility for carrying out the treatment.

This started to change at the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held in Accra, Ghana, in 2008, in which developing countries played a more active role in the preparations, and civil society groups across the developed and developing world were widely consulted. On the fragile-states front, perhaps the most significant development to come out of Accra was the establishment of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.<sup>1</sup> The Dialogue brings donor and recipient countries together to devise a realistic set of peacebuilding and statebuilding objectives to address the root causes of conflict and fragility. Its participants include OECD donors; nontraditional donors (such as Brazil and China); international and regional organizations (including the UN, the World Bank, the African Union, and the African Development Bank); representatives of civil society; and, most importantly, representatives of conflict-affected and fragile states. First proposed at a preparatory meeting in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, in July 2008, the Dialogue was endorsed in Accra in September 2008 and formally launched at the end of that year. Extensive consultations were carried out in 2009 and 2010 in Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Timor-Leste. These consultations informed the first formal meeting of the International Dialogue, which was held in Dili, Timor-Leste, in April 2010.

A small group of countries affected by conflict and fragility were deeply engaged throughout this process. Led by the finance minister of Timor-Leste, Emilia Pires, and the planning minister for Democratic Republic of Congo, Olivier Kamitatu Etsu, the group—initially consisting of Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, and Côte d’Ivoire—dubbed itself the “g7.” With more countries expressing interest, the group expanded and changed its name to the “g7+.” The g7+ countries met officially for the first time on the day before the opening of the International Dialogue in Dili, issuing a formal statement declaring their intention to work together as a coalition and to develop national strategies within their own countries for addressing crucial governance, economic and social development, and security priorities.

In their statement, the g7+ countries delivered a challenge to donors: work with us, not against us. “We recognise that ownership comes with a responsibility to define our needs and be accountable for delivery,” they claimed, but “we must give ourselves a transitional period to reinforce our capabilities and systems and not have complex and slow procedural requirements and conditions imposed upon us.”<sup>2</sup> The Dili Declaration—the outcome document of the

Dialogue meeting—echoed these themes and committed donors and fragile states alike to work together to develop an International Action Plan on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding to present at the Fourth High Level Forum, which was held in Busan, Korea, 29 November to 1 December 2011. A major milestone in this process was the outcome of the second global meeting of the Dialogue, held in Monrovia in June 2011, which resulted in a landmark agreement on five interim peacebuilding and statebuilding goals as preconditions to work toward the MDGs in fragile and conflict-affected states: legitimate politics, security, economic foundations, justice, and revenue and services. The peacebuilding and statebuilding goals were the cornerstone of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which was endorsed by members of the International Dialogue in Busan.

The g7+ (which has since expanded to include nineteen countries) has made a splash. Its formation represents the first time that a group of the world's most fragile and conflict-ridden countries has come together in a coalition around a common purpose in any forum. The group encompasses a set of paradoxes: the g7+ countries have embraced the mantle of fragility, but the group, in the words of Kamitatu Etsu, is a club that everyone "wants to leave as quickly as possible." The group includes Somalia, which represents the world's longest-running instance of total state collapse, as well as Timor-Leste and Sierra Leone, widely hailed as postconflict success stories with governments that have staked out ambitious national development goals. In a debate traditionally dominated by powerful donor countries, the ministers of the g7+ are often the most senior officials present in the International Dialogue meetings (where donors tend to be represented at the middle- to senior-bureaucrat level). And the most powerful voice in the room is often that of a diminutive Timorese woman.

Under the leadership of Pires and her partners in the g7+ (notably Kamitatu Etsu and Liberia's minister for planning and economic affairs, Amara Konneh), the group has continued to meet to establish a common position in advance of plenary meetings of the International Dialogue as well as on the margins of other high-level events (such as the MDG summit in September 2010, the UN General Assembly, the fall and spring meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative regional conference in August 2011). The g7+ countries solidified their positions prior to Busan at a retreat held in Juba, South Sudan, in October 2011 and have been instrumental in shaping the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States was endorsed in Busan.

The g7+ was born within the context of the broader aid effectiveness debate and thus far has remained primarily in the world of development. For the most part, the g7+ has been a club of planning and finance ministers who speak a common language and share a common set of frustrations when it comes to dealing with their international partners. (Meeting donors on their own turf, g7+ representatives are fluent in the vocabulary of international aid, throwing out phrases like "stakeholders" and "capacity development" with

practiced ease.) The International Dialogue created a unique entry point for the group, and its composition is not replicated in other settings such as the UN (where member states tend to align with their regional blocs) or with larger groups such as the G-77 or the Non-Aligned Movement.

This may be changing: the vice prime minister of Timor-Leste, José Luís Guterres, was invited to address the UN Security Council at a thematic debate held in January 2011 on “Post-conflict Peacebuilding: Institution-building” on behalf of the g7+. There has been talk of a possible informal meeting of UN ambassadors of the g7+ countries at the invitation of the current chair of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the permanent representative of Rwanda. There are persistent (albeit unconfirmed) rumors that the g7+ is seeking to establish an office in New York.

All of this would seem logical. After all, the fundamental challenge facing fragile states is a crisis of legitimacy and a breakdown in the relationship between state and society. At their core, statebuilding and peacebuilding are long-term, messy, domestic political processes. Although much of the aid effectiveness discourse has taken the flavor of a technical policy discussion, the International Dialogue between donors and fragile states is a deeply political discussion. Thus far, however, the g7+ as a forum of countries has not yet engaged in traditional political fora such as the United Nations.

The Peacebuilding Commission—an intergovernmental body that was created precisely to foster this type of political decisionmaking—would, on paper, be the right place for this conversation to happen. And yet it has not. Part of this is due to the fact that foreign ministries run the show in New York, where UN member states are represented by diplomats, not development ministers. Privately, some g7+ members and OECD staff who support the International Dialogue secretariat have voiced frustration with what they see as a lack of engagement by the PBC and have bristled at the PBC’s assertion of its “unique legitimacy” as a peacebuilding actor.<sup>3</sup>

In some ways, it is surprising that a similar coalition of conflict-affected countries has never emerged at the UN. In early 2006, following the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission, a small group of postconflict countries led by Rwanda and Croatia attempted to organize themselves to help shape the PBC in its early days. This effort soon fell flat as UN member states spent six months haggling over PBC membership and then, after adopting the first two countries onto the PBC’s agenda, seemed not to know what to do with them. The agenda countries themselves<sup>4</sup> (all of them nominally members of the g7+) have never organized themselves into any kind of coalition and their UN ambassadors have often been absent from PBC debates.

This is largely a problem of capacity because all six members are low-income African countries with small missions in New York (ranging in size from twelve diplomats in the case of Guinea, to a single ambassador in the case of Central African Republic).<sup>5</sup> But it may also reflect the fact that the real work of developing national strategies for peacebuilding and statebuilding,

prioritizing among competing goals, and allocating scarce resources against those priorities is carried out by national ministries of planning, finance, and unity and reconciliation (i.e., the ministers of the g7+ and their staff) rather than the ministries of foreign affairs that staff the UN missions. When Pires speaks of the strain placed on her ministry by the capricious practices of international donors, her words carry a unique credibility.

While much work lies ahead in implementing the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, the agreement is seen as a major accomplishment for the countries of the g7+ and their international partners. Thus far, however, perhaps the most noteworthy accomplishment of the g7+ is the very fact that the group exists, that its message has been so clear and consistent, and that it represents a new and important set of actors in international aid debates. It is important to neither overstate nor downplay the significance of the group's arrival on the global scene. And yet it seems clear that the members of g7+ have changed the debate on fragility by defining it in their own terms, based on their reading of their own context, and ensuring that conversations about development in fragile states also focus on the importance of security, justice, and legitimate political processes.

At the same time, the entire fragile-states agenda suffers from critical gaps between policy and practice. Despite the laudable commitments made since 2005, a recent independent evaluation of the Paris Declaration concluded that partner governments have come further in implementing the Paris commitments than donors, with the least progress made on managing for development results and mutual accountability.<sup>6</sup> Donors fared no better in the most recent monitoring survey of the Fragile States Principles, which showed international performance to be seriously off track in eight out of the ten principles.<sup>7</sup>

Critics increasingly argue that aid cannot be discussed in isolation from the broader financial context of trade policy, foreign direct investment, migration policy, and other conversations. Official development assistance accounts for just 0.2 percent of global GDP (despite the commitment first made in 1970, and reaffirmed in 2002 in Monterrey, for donor countries to raise this level to 0.7 percent). As a recent BetterAid publication points out, "if the Internationally-Agreed Development Goals are to be achieved, the other 99.8% of a country's economic activities also need to contribute to development effectiveness."<sup>8</sup> This is doubly true for many fragile and conflict-affected countries, which are the recipients of considerable security and political support. Such critics argue that, without overall reform in governance of the aid system, true change is likely to be elusive.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the rise of the g7+ is the larger truth that it reveals: donors do not build states; societies and their elites do. Peacebuilding and statebuilding in conflict-affected and fragile states should be understood as a system of incremental, long-term processes that are deeply intertwined. The possible pathways that are available over the longer term are prejudiced by the quality and success of preceding interventions and are characterized by dilemmas and trade-offs. Some dilemmas and trade-offs can be

anticipated and reconciled, but others present irresolvable contradictions between competing objectives that cannot be solved and must be managed. National leaders must be the ones who ultimately make those choices and are held accountable by their societies for the consequences.

It is tempting to see the g7+ as the solution to many asymmetries that plague political decisionmaking on conflict-affected and fragile states, but it is also important to recognize that the group, born in a specific context under specific leadership, is less than two years old. It should be given the space to carve out its own identity and its own agenda or it risks being suffocated by the good intentions of those who wish to instrumentalize its legitimacy—be they reform-minded donors, the OECD or the UN. Regardless of what happens to the g7+ and the International Dialogue after Busan, its members seem committed to continuing their efforts—in implementing the New Deal commitments in several pilot countries and in increased horizontal sharing of experiences in areas such as the management of natural resources where oil-rich Timor-Leste might have important lessons for a country like South Sudan.

One thing is clear: with tectonic shifts in the global economy, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, and the rise of the emerging powers, the playing field of international aid is changing rapidly. If the g7+ can remain grounded in national political realities and challenges, rather than becoming another talk shop, it could be an important player for many years to come. 🌐

## Notes

Vanessa Wyeth is a research fellow on peacebuilding and state fragility at the International Peace Institute, an independent think tank in New York. Portions of this article were drawn from a 2009 discussion paper written for the OECD, coauthored with Timothy Sisk, with valuable contributions from Dan Smith. From June to December 2011, she served as a visiting fellow at the US Agency for International Development, where she worked on fragile-states issues. Views expressed are the author's own and do not represent the views of IPI or the US government.

1. Basic information on the International Dialogue is drawn from the OECD website, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

2. Statement by the g7+ made on 10 April 2010, [www.G7plus.org/news-articles/2010/4/10/statement-by-the-G7.html](http://www.G7plus.org/news-articles/2010/4/10/statement-by-the-G7.html).

3. Author's off-the-record conversations with UN and OECD staff.

4. The countries on the PBC's agenda, in order in which they appeared, are: Burundi (2006), Sierra Leone (2006), Guinea Bissau (2007), Central African Republic (2008), Liberia (2010), and Guinea (2011).

5. Executive Office of the Secretary-General Protocol and Liaison Service, *Permanent Missions to the United Nations*, no. 301 (updated as of 1 September 2011).

6. B. Wood, J. Betts, F. Etta, J. Gayfer, D. Kabell, N. Ngwira, F. Sagasti, and M. Samaranyake, *The Evaluation of the Paris Declaration, Final Report* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, May 2011).

7. OECD, *International Engagement in Fragile States: Can't We Do Better?* (Paris: OECD, 2011).

8. BetterAid, *Making Development Cooperation Just: Governance Principles and Pillars*, Discussion Note (BetterAid Coordinating Group, 2010).