SCALING UP IN AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND NUTRITION

Going to Scale in Fragile States: Can It Work? Should We Try?
Laurence Chandy

2020 VISION
FOR FOOD, AGRICULTURE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

FOCUS 19 • BRIEF 19 • JUNE 2012

The term fragile state is used to describe a country whose government struggles to perform some of its most basic functions, due to a lack of either political will or capacity or a combination of the two. In these states one typically observes persistent deficiencies in the government's authority, legitimacy (as perceived by its citizens), or its provision of services. Depending on the measure used, one can identify between 30 and 40 fragile states, which together contain around a billion people: a diverse group capturing a range of conditions, from postconflict environments to dysfunctional and corrupt regimes. They all present great development challenges, which raises the following question: Is scaling up under such circumstances possible?

Why scale up in fragile states?

According to a World Bank 2002 task force report, "aid does not work well" in fragile states, "may even be counterproductive," and has historically recorded "a disturbingly high rate of failure." Given these grim judgments, and the well-documented challenges of moving to scale in any setting, should scaling up even be contemplated in fragile states? The answer is "yes," for three reasons.

First, the development challenges facing fragile states demand it. In the space of a few years, fragile states have moved from the periphery of the international development agenda to a focus of global aid efforts. To understand why, consider the following three facts: (i) the share of the world's poor living in fragile states is estimated to have doubled, from 20 to 40 percent, since 2005; (ii) no fragile country has yet achieved a single Millennium Development Goal (MDG); and (iii) two-thirds of the world's remaining low-income countries are fragile. Helping fragile states has thus become inseparable from commitments to fighting poverty, achieving the MDGs, and assisting low-income countries. Overcoming these challenges will not occur through one-time, token interventions. The 2011 World Development Report and the "New Deal" agreed to at the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea, are signs that the aid community recognizes this fact.

Second, there is growing recognition that aid to fragile states can achieve positive results if donors are willing to adapt their approaches to the environment. For instance, achieving genuine recipient ownership may require looking to the subnational level or to communities if the central government is unable or unwilling to fulfill the kind of leadership role required in recipient-donor relations. Aligning to country systems may require donors to apply greater oversight measures and the use of risk management instruments to ensure aid money is well spent. Approaches like these can likely claim some of the credit for narrowing the gap between the share of World Bank projects recording unsatisfactory performance ratings in fragile countries and the share receiving the same rating in stable settings since the early 1990s. However, the likelihood that this result is also partly explained by projects

becoming less ambitious—and the negative implications of this for scaling up—should not be overlooked.

Third, an approach to aid management and delivery that is supportive of a scaling-up agenda emphasizes many of the issues that are important to working in fragile states. These include using feasible and simple project designs, strengthening institutions alongside interventions, adopting long-term horizons, focusing on sustainability, and supporting endogenous learning.

Can scaling up work in fragile states?

This verdict leads to the core question: Can scaling up work in fragile states? The answer again is positive. There are, in fact, numerous examples of interventions being successfully brought to scale in fragile states, covering a range of different countries and sectors, including rural development and food security. (For two studies that provide a compendium of recent case study evidence, see the publications by Chandy and Linn and by Manor in "For further reading.")

This is not to suggest that scaling up in fragile states is straightforward. A review of the case studies suggests that executing scaling up in fragile settings is undoubtedly more challenging than in stable environments.

Three key challenges are apparent. First, political and social upheaval can easily thwart attempts to reach scale as donors struggle to shield their interventions from an unstable environment. Second, the weakness of formal institutions in fragile states (combined with low capacity) becomes an increasingly serious constraint as interventions reach greater scale and as the question of achieving sustainability comes into focus. Third, there is anecdotal evidence that donors may have backed away from efforts to move to scale due to the perceived risk of large-scale failure, which would likely be conspicuous and thus draw criticism.

At the same time, scaling up occurs more readily in fragile states than may be expected, with successful approaches from more stable environments often being picked up spontaneously. Donors have had particular success scaling up interventions whose success relies predominantly on identifying technical and logistical solutions and adaptation that play to donors' strengths.

How can projects be scaled up in these environments?

Successful scaling-up pathways in fragile states depend on donors exercising greater selectivity and scrutiny in determining which interventions should be scaled up, implying a higher threshold for what might constitute a "good candidate" project or program. Scaling-up pathways may also take longer to traverse in fragile states, as interventions are likely to run into more obstacles and take more time to embed. As a consequence, donors would be wise to reassess their project cycles in fragile states: scheduling early evaluations to inform resource allocation decisions and later evaluations to allow sustainability to be

properly assessed, and making multiyear commitments to individual interventions to allow them to expand at a realistic pace.

The role of drivers in fragile states is in many respects similar to that in other settings. Proven ideas and practical models have often been picked up in fragile states, contrary to the expectation that actors may be less responsive to recognizing and acting on the utility of promising results. Leaders undoubtedly have a role to play as drivers in supporting scaling up in fragile states, although there are dangers that must be avoided here. These include the perception that donors are picking political winners by nominating leaders, or that the survival of projects is tied too closely to the fortunes of a single leader's political career. Donors should therefore exercise prudence in working with local champions.

Finally, as might be expected, the greatest challenge to scaling up in fragile states is the limited "spaces," or room in which to operate effectively, that these environments provide. This is especially true for spaces that concern aspects of governance, politics, policy, and institutions.

Donors, on occasion, have found success in leveraging governance spaces at the subnational level, or away from the state entirely, in religious organizations, the private sector, or informal customary institutions. Such approaches have proven particularly effective at identifying fast-track solutions to essential service delivery and may offer sustainable solutions. However, the central development objective in fragile states is state building, so the challenge of building sustainable state structures cannot be ignored. Successful scaling up in fragile states usually depends on simultaneously securing institutional, policy, and capacity improvements. Targeting these improvements should therefore be integrated into project design.

The government of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP) provides a vivid example of the opportunities and challenges of achieving scale in fragile states. The PSNP was established in 2005 with the support of the UK Department for International Development and the World Bank. Its aim was to "graduate" people from food insecurity through a combination of food and cash transfers and by building community assets via associated public works schemes. The PSNP took an unusual pathway to scale. Based on a model that had proven successful in other countries, the Ethiopian government decided on an immediate rollout at scale across 7 of the country's 10 regions, against the advice of donors who preferred a phased approach. This decision likely reflected the strong ownership and political commitment behind the project, and the belief among Ethiopia's leadership that this program can help stimulate rural growth. On the downside, a weakness of the PSNP is in the design of its finances. Rather than falling within the normal framework for financing public services, the PSNP operates through a specific federal grant that relies on a discretionary process that is perceived as vulnerable to abuse through patronage and regional bias.

Conclusion

Fragile states increasingly represent a central challenge for the international development community. It is tempting for aid donors to respond with small, ad hoc, and short-term interventions in these environments. However, for fragile states to succeed, donors need to work with local stakeholders in developing long-term scaling-up pathways, building systematically on what works. They must be ready to take risks and adapt to rapidly changing environments. Experience shows that this is possible and necessary.

For further reading: L. Chandy and J. Linn, "Taking Development Activities to Scale in Fragile and Low Capacity Environments." Global Working Paper 41, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2011; A. Gelb, "How Can Donors Create Incentives for Results and Flexibility for Fragile States? A Proposal for IDA." Working Paper 227, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2010; D. Gilligan, J. Hoddinott, and A. Seyoum Taffesse, "The Impact of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme and its Linkages," Journal of Development Studies 45 (10): 1684-1706; A. Hartmann and J. Linn, "Scaling Up: A Framework and Lessons for Development Effectiveness from Literature and Practice." Wolfensohn Center for Development Working Paper 5, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008; J. Manor, Aid That Works: Successful Development in Fragile States (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007); World Bank, World Bank Group Work in Low-Income Countries under Stress: A Taskforce Report (Washington, DC: 2002); World Bank, World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development (Washington, DC: 2011).

Laurence Chandy (lchandy@brookings.edu) is a fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program at the Brookings Institution.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty

IFPRI®

A member of the CGIAR Consortium