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State Fragility in Africa: Historical Roots, Indicators, and the Dilemma of State-Building

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Abstract:
This article examines the problem of state fragility in Africa from historical and institutional perspectives, seeking to answer a central question: Why does the African state remain fragile despite decades of independence and reform? Adopting a comparative historical approach and new institutional analysis, the article deconstructs the colonial roots of fragility and presents contemporary fragility indicators, such as the Fragile States Index and World Governance Indicators, along with a critical evaluation of these measures. It also discusses the dilemma of state-building through failed models (Somalia, Central African Republic, Chad) and relatively more successful ones (Rwanda, Botswana, Mauritius). The article concludes that fragility is not an inevitable African destiny but rather the product of historical accumulation that can be overcome through context-sensitive foundational approaches that redefine the state based on African social realities rather than imported models.
Keywords: State Fragility, Africa, State-Building, Colonialism, Fragile States Index, Rwanda, Somalia.

Introduction

This article examines the issue of state fragility in Africa from a historical and institutional perspective. It seeks to answer a central question: Why does the African state remain fragile despite decades of independence and the implementation of numerous reform initiatives? The study adopts a comparative historical approach, combining modern institutional analysis with an examination of the colonial legacies that have entrenched state fragility. It further analyzes contemporary indicators of fragility while highlighting their limitations. In addition, the article explores the challenges of state-building through a comparative examination of failed cases such as Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Chad and relatively successful cases, including Rwanda, Botswana, and Mauritius. The study concludes that state fragility in Africa is not an inevitable destiny, but rather the outcome of cumulative historical interactions that can be overcome through strategies that recognize local specificities and seek to redefine the concept of the state in a manner consistent with African social realities rather than relying on imported institutional models.

Since the independence of most African states during the 1960s, the modern African state has experienced a profound structural crisis manifested in the weakness of its institutions and its inability to provide security, development, and social justice. Rather than functioning as an engine of development and a guarantor of citizens' rights, the state has frequently become an arena for competition over resources, an instrument of repression, or merely a symbolic entity lacking effective territorial control and incapable of delivering essential public services to its citizens.

According to the World Bank's 2025 estimates, 39 emerging and developing economies are classified as Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FCS**)**, the overwhelming majority of which are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. This list includes countries such as Burundi, Chad, Comoros, the Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2025). Furthermore, the Fragile States Index (2024) indicates that 13 of the world's 15 most fragile states are located in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Somalia, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Sudan occupying the highest positions. This fragility should not be viewed as a temporary or circumstantial phenomenon; rather, it represents a deeply entrenched crisis reflecting the cumulative failures of political, economic, and social systems.

The significance of this topic stems from the recognition that state fragility in Africa is no longer merely an internal concern of African countries; it has become a challenge to international security as a whole. Weak states provide an enabling environment for the growth of terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, in addition to groups affiliated with the Islamic State operating across the African Sahel. Moreover, state fragility facilitates the activities of transnational networks involved in human trafficking and drug trafficking, while contributing to large-scale displacement that directly affects Europe and the Middle East (OECD, 2023). Consequently, analyzing the underlying causes and mechanisms of state fragility is no longer merely an academic exercise but has become an urgent political and security imperative.

Research Problem

The article is guided by the following central research question:

Why does the African state continue to experience fragility despite decades of political independence, substantial development assistance, and numerous state-building initiatives?

From this overarching question emerge the following sub-questions:

1. What historical factors explain state fragility in Africa?
2. To what extent do existing fragility indicators accurately reflect the underlying causes and manifestations of state fragility?
3. Why have state-building efforts failed in most African countries, while achieving relative success in others?

Research Hypotheses

To address these questions, the article advances three principal hypotheses:

The first hypothesis argues that contemporary African state fragility is not the result of inherent underdevelopment or inherited cultural characteristics, but rather the consequence of the colonial legacy. Colonial policies established political systems characterized by economic and social marginalization, the exploitation of rent-based resources, and the artificial and poorly conceived demarcation of borders (Mamdani, 1996; Herbst, 2000; Young, 1994). Accordingly, any future efforts to build strong states cannot succeed without a profound understanding of this historical legacy.

The second hypothesis contends that the international tools and indicators commonly employed to measure state fragility fail to capture its structural causes. Instead, they concentrate primarily on measuring visible symptoms while neglecting the underlying institutional foundations of fragility. Moreover, these indicators are generally biased toward the Western model of the state (Carment, Prest & Samy, 2021; Hagmann & Péclard, 2010), resulting in policies that prioritize security and legal institutionalization rather than addressing the structural roots of the problem.

The third hypothesis highlights the challenges associated with state-building efforts in Africa. The imposition of the European-inspired nation-state model upon culturally diverse African societies characterized by strong tribal structures and customary traditions has often generated profound tensions between modern state institutions and local socio-cultural realities. This mismatch has frequently led either to the collapse of political systems or to forms of fragile stability sustained primarily through coercion.

Taken together, these hypotheses provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities surrounding the construction of strong and sustainable states in Africa by emphasizing the historical legacy of colonialism, critically assessing prevailing international measurement tools, and analyzing the contradictions arising from the adoption of institutional models that are poorly suited to local context

Research Methodology

This article adopts the comparative historical method, which facilitates tracing the evolution of the African state across different historical periods, beginning with the pre-colonial era and extending to the present day. Particular emphasis is placed on major institutional transformations and critical historical junctures, including the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), the waves of African independence (1957–1975), and the collapse of several African states during the 1990s such as Somalia, Rwanda, and Liberia as highlighted by Collier and Sambanis (2005).

In addition, the study draws upon the New Institutionalism approach as developed by Douglass North (1990) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, 2019). This perspective emphasizes the decisive role of historical institutions in shaping trajectories of development or underdevelopment. Institutions whether formal (such as constitutions and legal systems) or informal (including customary norms, tribal structures, and religious traditions) play a fundamental role in determining the incentives available to political and economic actors. Inclusive institutions create an environment conducive to development and stability, whereas extractive institutions that serve only narrow elites tend to perpetuate poverty and state fragility.

Furthermore, the article employs a comparative case study approach to illustrate patterns of success and failure. The analysis examines two failed states (Somalia and the Central African Republic) alongside two relatively successful states (Botswana and Rwanda), while also considering Mauritius as an exceptional case, following the methodological framework proposed by Gerring (2007). This analytical strategy makes it possible to derive broadly applicable lessons while avoiding excessive or misleading generalizations.

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Description	component
Comparative Historical Analysis	Primary Method
New Institutionalism	Theoretical Framework
Analysis of historical documents, international reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature	Data Collection Technique
Failed states: Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Chad. Relatively successful states: Botswana, Rwanda, and Mauritius	Case Studies
World Bank reports, Fragile States Index, and peer-reviewed academic literature	Sources
1884 (Berlin Conference) – 2025	Period of Analysis

Table 1. The Ten Most Fragile States in the World (2024

Category	FSI Score (out of 120)	Region	Country	Global Rank
Alert	112.7	East Africa	Somalia	**1**
Alert	111.3	East Africa	South Sudan	**2**
Alert	109.8	Central Africa	Central African Republic	**3**
Alert	108.5	Northeast Africa	Sudan	**4**
Alert	107.2	Central Africa	Chad	**5**
Alert	106.1	Central Africa	Democratic Republic of the Congo	**6**
Alert	105.4	Asia	Afghanistan	**7**
Alert	104.2	West Africa	Guinea	**8**
Alert	103.8	West Africa	Burkina Faso	**9**
Alert	102.9	Latin America	Haiti	**10**

Source: Fund for Peace (2024). Fragile States Index 2024

Note: Eight of the world's ten most fragile states are located in Africa, **while** thirteen of the top fifteen are African countries

1. . Historical Roots of State Fragility in Africa

First: The Pre-Colonial Era Political Diversity

Prior to the arrival of European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century, Africa was characterized by remarkable political diversity and institutional complexity. In West Africa, powerful empires emerged, including the Ghana Empire (4th–13th centuries), the Mali Empire (13th–15th centuries), and the Songhai Empire (15th–16th centuries). These polities possessed organized taxation systems, standing armies, and extensive trans-Saharan trade networks.

In Central Africa, the Kingdom of Kongo (14th–19th centuries) established diplomatic relations with Portugal. In East Africa, prosperous sultanates such as the Sultanate of Zanzibar dominated Indian Ocean commerce. Meanwhile, in Southern Africa, the Zulu Kingdom, under the leadership of Shaka, emerged in the early nineteenth century, while the Great Lakes region was home to kingdoms such as Rwanda, Burundi, and Ankole (Cooper, 2002; Young, 1994).

Despite this remarkable political diversity, none of these entities corresponded to the modern European conception of the nation-state (Herbst, 2000). The modern European state, which crystallized following the Peace of Westphalia (1648), rested upon four fundamental pillars: internationally recognized fixed borders, a centralized authority monopolizing the legitimate use of force, an organized taxation system, and a unified concept of citizenship transcending ethnic and religious affiliations.

These characteristics were either absent or only partially developed in pre-colonial African societies. Jeffrey Herbst explains this divergence by emphasizing the geographical and demographic differences between Europe and Africa. In Europe, land was scarce while population density was relatively high, making territorial control essential to state formation. In Africa, by contrast, land was abundant and populations were comparatively sparse, leading rulers to prioritize control over people rather than territory. Consequently, territorial boundaries carried far less political significance than they did in Europe, and there was little incentive to establish highly centralized states.

Instead, political authority was more decentralized, while loyalties were distributed among tribal, clan, religious, and kinship affiliations. This distinctive political order should not be interpreted as evidence of "backwardness"; rather, it reflected a political logic adapted to Africa's historical environment. Nevertheless, this institutional configuration rendered African societies more vulnerable to colonial penetration once European powers began their conquest of the continent. African societies confronted colonial powers equipped with standing armies, artificially imposed territorial boundaries, and a rigid conception of sovereignty, enabling colonial administrations to fill existing institutional vacuums and govern through domination and coercion (Mamdani, 1996; Young, 2012

Second: Colonialism The True Origins of State Fragility

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) may be regarded as the defining historical moment that laid the foundations for state fragility in Africa. During this conference, the major European powers including Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Italy partitioned the African continent among themselves without any African participation or consideration for existing indigenous political entities. The borders they drew were entirely artificial, disregarding pre-existing political structures as well as ethnic, linguistic, and religious distributions (Englebert, 2009; Mamdani, 2016).

The consequences were profound. Ethnically and culturally distinct communities were incorporated into the same political entities, as occurred with Somalis, Ethiopians, and Oromo populations within Ethiopia, or the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. Conversely, culturally homogeneous groups were divided across multiple states, such as the Yoruba, who were split between Nigeria and Benin, and the Mandinka, whose communities became dispersed across Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, and Burkina Faso (Asiwaju, 1985).

As Mahmood Mamdani explains in his influential work *Citizen and Subject* (1996), colonialism did far more than redraw geographical boundaries; it fundamentally reconfigured systems of governance by institutionalizing social divisions. Within British colonies, the policy of Indirect Rule appointed traditional chiefs as intermediaries acting on behalf of the colonial administration. Rather than preserving indigenous authority, this arrangement reinforced tribal divisions and transformed them into institutional foundations for political competition and the distribution of public resources.

By contrast, French colonies adopted a policy of Direct Rule, dismantling many indigenous institutions and replacing them with a centralized French bureaucratic apparatus that lacked local legitimacy and social embeddedness (Crowder, 1964).

The colonial economic system was likewise designed to serve metropolitan interests rather than those of African societies. Colonial economies were structured around extractive and rent-based production, specializing in the cultivation of export-oriented cash crops such as cotton, cocoa, coffee, and rubber while neglecting industrial development. Simultaneously, Africa's mineral wealth including copper in the Congo, gold in South Africa, and phosphates in Morocco was systematically exploited without fostering domestic manufacturing capacities (Rodney, 1972; Bond, 2019).

As a consequence, newly independent African states inherited economies characterized by structural dependence on external economic centers. Their development became overwhelmingly reliant on exporting primary commodities while importing manufactured goods, leaving them highly vulnerable to fluctuations in international commodity markets (Van de Walle, 2001).

Third: Post-Independence Inheriting the Fragile State

As African countries gradually achieved independence between 1957 and 1975, political authority was transferred to national elites who inherited states characterized by artificial borders, rent-dependent economies, external dependency, and societies deeply fragmented along ethnic and tribal lines as a consequence of colonial rule (Young, 2012). Rather than reconstructing the state on new and inclusive foundations, most post-colonial elites consolidated their authority by employing many of the same coercive instruments that had been developed under colonial administration.

Scholars have described this phenomenon through the concept of Neopatrimonialism (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Mkandawire, 2015). Under neopatrimonial systems, formal institutions such as constitutions, legislatures, and judicial bodies continue to exist, yet they function only superficially and are rarely allowed to operate according to formal legal principles. Instead, political life is governed by personal, ethnic, and tribal loyalties.

Within such systems, presidents distribute public offices and state resources to members of their own ethnic group, region, or family, who subsequently allocate these benefits to their own networks of supporters. Consequently, the state ceases to function as a social contract among equal citizens and instead becomes a political prize over which competing elites struggle (Bayart, 2009).

This pattern of governance was further aggravated by persistent external intervention. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union supported authoritarian regimes across Africa including Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire and Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia in exchange for geopolitical loyalty.

Following the end of the Cold War, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promoted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that significantly reduced public expenditure on health, education, and agriculture while encouraging privatization of state-owned enterprises. Although intended to improve economic efficiency, these reforms frequently intensified poverty, increased social discontent, and undermined the state's capacity to provide essential public services (Ferguson, 2006; Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999).

Table 2. Historical Roots of State Fragility: An Analytical Summary**:**

Impact on State Fragility	Principal Characteristics	Historical Period
Absence of a strong centralized state, though not "fragility" in the contemporary sense	Diverse political formations, flexible borders, decentralized authority, abundant land resources	**Pre-Colonial Period (before 1880)**
Creation of states without nations and institutionalization of ethnic and tribal divisions	Partition of Africa, artificial borders, partial destruction of indigenous institutions	**Berlin Conference and Early Colonial Rule (1884–1914)**
Structural dependency, weakening of local capacities, consolidation of collaborative elites	Extractive and rent-based economies, indirect/direct rule, neglect of education and development	**Colonial Era (1914–1945)**
Continuation of fragility under new political leadership and emergence of neopatrimonial governance	Rapid transfer of power, inheritance of colonial institutions, competition for political authority	**Late Colonialism and Early Independence (1945–1975)**
Chronic fragility, state collapse (Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone), and the emergence of failed states	Authoritarian regimes, corruption, dependency, civil wars, foreign intervention	**Post-Independence (1975–2025)**

Source: **Herbst (2000), Mamdani (1996), Young (1994, 2012), Bayart(2009)**

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Indicators of State Fragility: Significance and Critiques

First: Major International Indicators

The Fragile States Index (FSI)

The Fragile States Index (FSI), published annually by the Fund for Peace, is among the most prominent and widely used instruments for assessing state fragility and has considerable influence within both academic and policy circles. The Index is constructed around twelve sub-indicators, grouped into three principal dimensions.

The social dimension encompasses indicators such as demographic pressures, forced displacement, group grievances, and human flight. The economic dimension measures uneven economic development and poverty. Finally, the political dimension evaluates state legitimacy, the quality of public services, respect for human rights, the effectiveness of the security apparatus, factionalized elites, and external intervention.

Based on these indicators, countries are classified into four categories: Alert, representing the highest level of fragility; Warning; Moderate; and Sustainable, indicating the highest degree of stability. According to the 2024 Fragile States Index, the ten most fragile countries in the world are presented in Table (1).

Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)

Published by the World Bank since 1996, the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) assess six dimensions of governance across more than 200 countries and territories worldwide:

a. Voice and Accountability
b. Political Stability and Absence of Violence
c. Government Effectiveness
d. Regulatory Quality
e. Rule of Law
f. Control of Corruption

Each dimension is measured on a scale ranging from −2.5 (weakest performance) to +2.5 (strongest performance).

According to the latest available data for 2024, Somalia scored −2.3 in Political Stability, −2.1 in Rule of Law, and −1.9 in Government Effectiveness. Similarly low scores were recorded by the Central African Republic, Chad, Libya, and Yemen. In contrast, Botswana, Mauritius, and Rwanda despite continuing criticisms concerning human rights in Rwanda perform relatively better across several governance dimensions (World Bank, 2024).

Global Peace Index (GPI)

The Global Peace Index (GPI) is published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) and measures levels of peace, security, and violence across states.

According to the 2024 report, the most violent and unstable African countries were South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This ranking closely mirrors the list of the world's most fragile states, underscoring the strong correlation between state fragility and armed violence (IEP, 2024).

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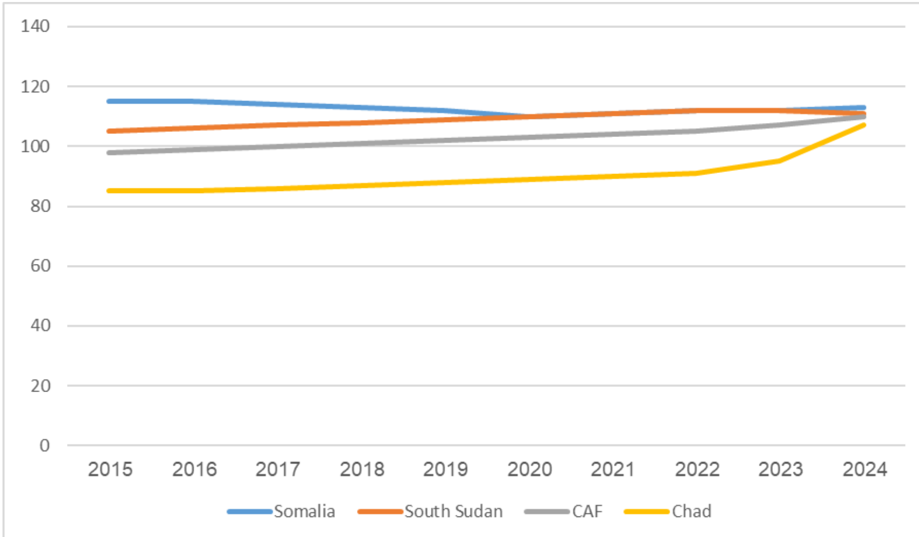
Line Graph: Trends in State Fragility among the Five Most Fragile African States (2015–2024)



Source: **Fund for Peace (2015-2024). Fragile States Index.**

Anatory Note: The graph illustrates an overall upward trend in fragility scores among Africa's five most fragile states during the period 2015–2024, with only limited fluctuations.

Somalia consistently remained the world's most fragile state throughout the period.

South Sudan has steadily approached Somalia's level of fragility since 2020.

Although the Central African Republic and Chad recorded slight improvements in certain years, both countries have remained firmly within the "Alert" category.

Second: A Critical Assessment of Existing Indicators

Although these international indicators provide valuable tools for identifying countries requiring international attention and for monitoring broad trends in state fragility, they nevertheless suffer from significant structural limitations.

First Critique: Western Conceptual Bias

These indices are fundamentally constructed upon Western conceptions of the state. Within this framework, the "good state" is assumed to be centralized, bureaucratic, secular, governed by positive law, and grounded in liberal individual rights.

However, this model emerged from a uniquely European historical trajectory shaped by the Religious Wars, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Applying it uncritically to African societies overlooks the fact that African political communities often possess different understandings of authority, justice, and social organization.

For example, these indices frequently regard customary or tribal institutions as obstacles to good governance. Yet, in many African societies, such institutions continue to enjoy greater legitimacy and practical effectiveness at the local level than formal state institutions (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Boege & Rinck, 2021).

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Second Critique: Confusing Causes with Symptoms

Most international indicators measure variables such as poverty, violence, displacement, and weak public services.

These are manifestations of state fragility rather than its underlying causes.

The deeper structural causes including colonialism, artificial borders, historical economic exploitation, and institutional shocks are largely absent from these measurement frameworks (Carment, Prest & Samy, 2021).

Consequently, these indices provide only a snapshot of current conditions without adequately explaining why particular states became fragile in the first place.

Third Critique: Misguided Policy Prescriptions

Because these indicators strongly influence international policymaking, donor organizations including the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States often design state-building programs around the dimensions measured by these indices.

Such interventions typically emphasize:

- strengthening military and police institutions;
- reinforcing the rule of law through courts and prisons;
- combating corruption through oversight bodies; and
- expanding public services such as schools and hospitals.

Although these measures may produce short-term improvements, they largely neglect the historical dimension of state fragility.

As a result, they frequently fail to generate durable stability because they address the symptoms of fragility rather than the disease itself (Risse & Krasner, 2022; Hameiri & Jones, 2023).

Mahmood Mamdani (2018), in his influential article "The African State at a Crossroads," aptly argues that:

"Measuring state fragility without understanding its colonial history is akin to measuring a patient's temperature without seeking the cause of the fever."

Superficial analysis produces superficial interventions, and superficial interventions ultimately generate chronic state fragility.

Key References	Analytical Explanation	Dimension of Critique
Hagmann & Péclard (2010); Boege & Rinck (2021)	Fragility indicators rely upon a normative conception of the state derived from the Western model (centralized state, positive law, and strong formal institutions), thereby marginalizing hybrid and customary governance systems rooted in local traditions.	**Western Model Bias**

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Carment, Prest & Samy (2021); OECD (2023)	Existing indicators focus primarily on manifestations of fragility—such as poverty, violence, and displacement—while overlooking deeper structural and historical causes, including colonial legacies, artificial borders, and failures of state formation.	**Confusion between Causes and Outcomes**
Krasner & Risse (2022); Hameiri & Jones (2023)	This analytical deficiency directs policy toward security-oriented interventions and support for formal institutions while neglecting the deeper roots of fragility, including historical justice and the reconstruction of the social contract.	**Limited Policy Effectiveness**
Straus (2022); Mamdani (2018)	Existing indices overlook substantial differences among countries with respect to colonial legacies, ethnic composition, political systems, and geographical conditions, often grouping fundamentally different states within the same analytical category.	**Neglect of Contextual Specificities**

5. The Dilemma of State-Building in Africa: Between Imported Models and Local Realities

Following the end of the Cold War, the concept of state-building emerged as one of the principal priorities of the international community. It was widely assumed that rebuilding fragile states would constitute the most effective strategy for preventing civil wars, combating terrorism, and promoting sustainable development. Consequently, international organizations including the United Nations, the World Bank, the African Union, and the European Union launched extensive state-building initiatives across numerous African countries.

The prevailing assumption underlying these initiatives was that the institutions of the modern Western state could be replicated in African contexts. Accordingly, state-building programs concentrated on drafting constitutions, organizing elections, reforming security sectors, strengthening judicial institutions, and improving public administration.

Despite the substantial financial resources devoted to these efforts, outcomes have frequently fallen short of expectations. In many cases, newly established institutions remained weak and lacked societal legitimacy, while political instability and violent conflict persisted. This outcome suggests that state-building cannot be reduced to the transplantation of formal institutions; rather, it requires institutions that are deeply rooted in the historical, social, and cultural realities of the societies they are intended to govern.

First: Somalia The Collapse of the State

Somalia is widely regarded as one of the most prominent examples of state failure in the contemporary era.

Following the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, the central state disintegrated entirely. Government institutions ceased to function, the national army fragmented, and authority became dispersed among clan-based militias and warlords.

Over the subsequent decades, repeated international interventions including the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) failed to establish a stable and effective state.

A principal explanation for this failure lies in the fact that these interventions prioritized the reconstruction of formal governmental institutions while paying insufficient attention to Somalia's deeply entrenched clan structures and traditional systems of governance. Consequently, state institutions lacked social legitimacy and remained dependent on external political, military, and financial support (Menkhaus, 2014).

Second: The Central African Republic Persistent Institutional Fragility

The Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced repeated cycles of coups d'état, armed conflict, and political instability since gaining independence in 1960.

The state's effective authority remains largely confined to the capital, Bangui, while vast regions of the country continue to be controlled by armed groups.

Although international peacekeeping missions have contributed to reducing levels of violence in certain periods, they have been unable to establish sustainable state institutions capable of maintaining security and delivering public services throughout the national territory.

This experience demonstrates that external military stabilization alone cannot compensate for the absence of inclusive political institutions or a broadly accepted social contract (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Third: Botswana A Model of Relative Success

In contrast to many other African states, Botswana is frequently cited as one of the continent's most successful examples of state-building.

Since independence in 1966, Botswana has maintained political stability, respected constitutional governance, and achieved sustained economic growth.

Several factors explain this relative success:

- the gradual integration of traditional institutions into the modern political system;
- prudent management of diamond revenues;
- relatively low levels of corruption;
- and the existence of an effective and professional public administration.

Rather than replacing customary institutions, Botswana incorporated them into the modern state structure, thereby strengthening political legitimacy and enhancing institutional resilience (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; North, Wallis & Weingast, 2009).

Fourth: Rwanda Development under a Strong State

Following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda embarked upon an ambitious state-building project under the leadership of Paul Kagame.

The government implemented comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening public administration, combating corruption, expanding access to healthcare and education, and promoting rapid economic development.

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As a result, Rwanda has recorded some of the highest economic growth rates in Africa and has consistently improved its performance across numerous governance indicators.

Nevertheless, many scholars and human rights organizations have argued that these achievements have come at the expense of political pluralism, freedom of expression, and civil liberties.

Accordingly, Rwanda illustrates that state capacity and democratic governance do not necessarily advance simultaneously; a state may become institutionally effective while remaining politically restrictive (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Reyntjens, 2015).

Fifth: Mauritius Inclusive Institutions and Sustainable Development

Among African countries, Mauritius represents one of the clearest examples of successful institution-building.

Despite its ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, Mauritius has succeeded in developing:

- stable democratic institutions;
- an independent judiciary;
- regular and competitive elections;
- and a diversified economy no longer dependent on a single export commodity.

Many scholars attribute this success to the country's ability to construct inclusive political institutions, encourage power-sharing among different communities, and maintain strong commitments to the rule of law and governmental accountability (Subramanian & Roy, 2003).

Criterion	Somalia	Central African Republic	Chad	Botswana	Rwanda	Mauritius
Fragile States Index (FSI), 2024	**112.7** (1st globally)	**109.8** (3rd globally)	**107.2** (5th globally)	**68.4** (Moderate)	**82.3** (Warning)	**45.2** (Stable)
GDP per capita (USD)	~500	~500	~700	~8,000	~1,000	~12,000
Political Stability (since independence)	Complete state collapse (1991)	Recurrent coups	Fragile stability under repression	Highly stable	Stable under an iron grip	Highly stable
Colonial Legacy	Italian / British	French	French	British	German / Belgian	French / British
Key Determinant of Success / Failure	Absence of national consensus	Absence of a national project	Concealed fragility combined with oil rent dependence	Rare tribal consensus and diamond resources	Coercive reconciliation and a strong centralized state	Managed diversity and a diversified economy

Replicability as a Model	Not replicable	Not replicable	Not replicable	Difficult to replicate	Controversial	Applicable only under exceptional circumstances

Lessons Learned from Successful and Failed Models

1. The Absence of an Ideal Model

A comparison of the various models reveals a fundamental reality: every country requires an approach that is suited to its unique circumstances. Botswana's success, for example, was built upon a rare degree of tribal consensus and prudent leadership, whereas Rwanda's success depended on a strong centralized state and a coercive reconciliation strategy. Mauritius, on the other hand, owes its success to its insular nature and exceptional circumstances. Consequently, any attempt to replicate any of these models unchanged in a different context is destined to fail from the outset.

2. A Strong State Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

The existence of a strong state is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving development; however, it is not sufficient in itself. Rwanda, for example, possesses an exceptionally strong state, yet one that tends toward political repression. Conversely, excessive state weakness, as in the case of Somalia, results in complete state collapse. The real challenge lies in striking a balance between state strength and the protection of individual freedoms.

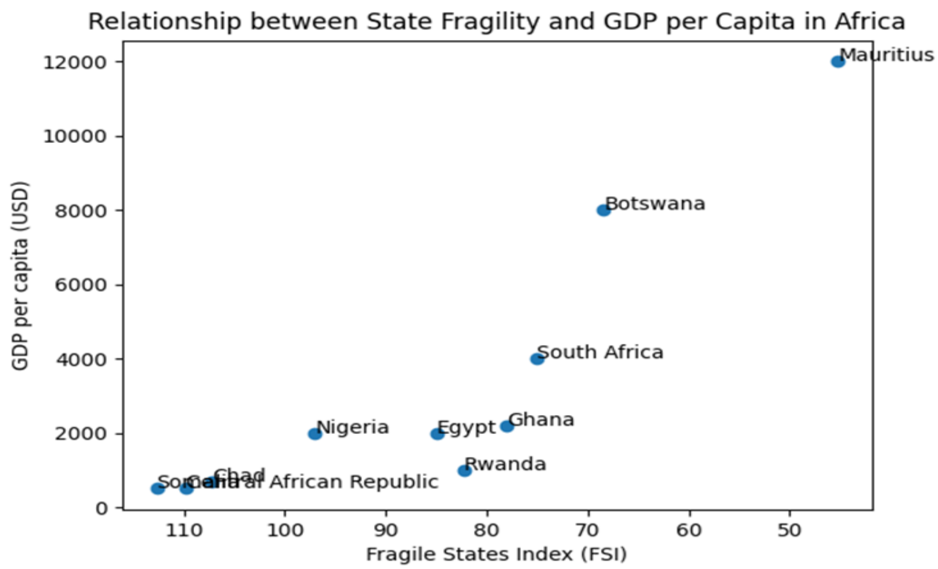
3. The Importance of Historical Context

History exerts a profound influence on development trajectories. Countries that were not subjected to prolonged and brutal colonial rule, such as Botswana and Mauritius, were able to achieve development with relative ease. By contrast, countries that experienced harsh colonial domination, such as Somalia, Chad, and the Central African Republic, continue to suffer from the enduring legacy of that past. Nevertheless, historical context should not be regarded as a rigid determinant of the future; rather, the lessons of history must be taken into account when designing reform strategies.

4. The Cost of Development

The experiences of Rwanda, Botswana, and Mauritius may appear to be developmental miracles. Yet each of these countries has paid a substantial price for its achievements. In Rwanda, developmental success has been accompanied by political repression and military intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Botswana, meanwhile, has benefited considerably from the abundance of its natural resources, particularly diamonds, which may not constitute a permanent source of prosperity in the future. As for Mauritius, its relatively small size has greatly facilitated both governance and development.

Sources:
Fund for Peace (2024); World Bank 2024)
Kelsall & vom Hau, 2021; Straus, 2022; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019; Buzard & Graham, 2023; Radelet, 2022



:**source**: Fund for Peace (2024); World Bank ;(2024) Author's own analysis

Explanatory Note: The figure above illustrates a clear inverse relationship between state fragility (the lower the Fragile States Index (FSI) score, the better the performance) and GDP per capita. Countries exhibiting lower levels of fragility (Mauritius and Botswana) enjoy the highest levels of per capita income, whereas the most fragile states (Somalia, Chad, and the Central African Republic) record the lowest levels of per capita income. Although this relationship does not necessarily imply direct causality (i.e., whether poverty causes fragility or fragility causes poverty), it nevertheless confirms the existence of a strong correlation between the two variables

Conclusion: Is State Fragility Destiny or a Matter of Choice?

This article has demonstrated that state fragility in Africa is neither an inherent characteristic of the continent, an inevitable destiny, nor the product of an intrinsic "backwardness." Rather, it is the cumulative outcome of historical processes that can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Achieving this, however, requires enormous efforts, sustained political will, and long-term patience.

A significant proportion of this fragility can be traced to the deep roots of colonialism, which contributed to the creation of artificial borders during the Berlin Conference (1884–1885). These borders produced states without nations and nations divided among multiple states. Moreover, colonial economic policies, which emphasized extraction and rent-seeking, generated structural dependency on global markets. Likewise, both direct and indirect colonial systems of governance deepened ethnic and tribal cleavages, transforming them into central features of political life.

Nevertheless, although colonial history constitutes an essential part of the explanation, it should not be employed as an excuse, but rather as an analytical framework for understanding the origins of contemporary fragility. Ignoring this historical legacy renders state-building efforts superficial and ultimately doomed to failure.

The fragility indicators currently in use have undoubtedly proven valuable in identifying the most fragile states and monitoring developments over time. However, they also suffer from fundamental shortcomings, most notably Western bias and the absence of a deep understanding of Africa's historical and cultural realities. These limitations may result in misguided and sometimes even harmful policy prescriptions. Consequently, there is an urgent need to develop indicators and analytical tools that reflect local realities and enhance their accuracy by actively involving African scholars in both the design and interpretation of these measures.

With regard to state-building, the central challenge is fundamentally existential:

- How can a strong state be built without becoming authoritarian?
- How can ethnic and political diversity be managed without erasing it?
- How can sovereignty be achieved without isolation?

Failed cases such as Somalia and Chad illustrate the enormous costs of state failure, whereas the experiences of Botswana, Rwanda, and Mauritius demonstrate that success is indeed possible. Nevertheless, every success carries its own price.

Botswana benefited from an exceptional degree of tribal cohesion that is difficult to replicate. Rwanda achieved remarkable progress, but at the expense of political freedoms. Mauritius, in turn, benefited from its exceptional circumstances as an island state.

Accordingly, these experiences cannot be mechanically replicated. Instead, flexible solutions adapted to diverse local contexts should be pursued.

Within this framework, scholars and policymakers should focus on developing general principles capable of adaptation, rather than searching for a single ideal model. Among these principles are:

- Prioritizing local development as a fundamental process undertaken simultaneously with central state-building;
- Combining modern institutional structures with traditional governance systems through hybrid institutional arrangements;
- Treating historical reconciliation as the foundation of reconstruction; and
- Recognizing that state-building is a generational process requiring decades rather than merely a few years.

Proposed Recommendations

First: Academic Recommendations

1. Develop a new framework for measuring state fragility that takes into account historical factors such as the age of artificial borders, the intensity of colonial violence, the type of colonial administration (direct or indirect), the institutional effects of the post-independence period, and the degree of external economic dependence. African scholars and regional specialists should be involved in the design and analysis of these indicators in a manner that takes into consideration the local environment and context.

2. Avoid binary debates and obstructive dichotomies, and move toward models that combine diverse values, such as individual and collective rights, centralized and decentralized institutions, and formal and informal systems.

3. Conduct in-depth comparative studies to identify the factors influencing the success of some states and the failure of others. Such studies should include variations in geographical location, natural resources, demographic composition, colonial legacy, the role of leadership, and the influence of external powers, while employing diverse research tools that include both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Second: Policy Recommendations (for Decision-Makers and Donor Agencies)

1. Historical Review of the State-Building Process

Before providing any assistance or implementing any reforms, a comprehensive historical review should be conducted, including: recognition of colonial injustices, reconciliation among conflicting groups, and reconsideration of borders wherever possible (or, at a minimum, mitigating their effects through special arrangements for mobility and dual citizenship). (Englebert, 2009; Mamdani, 2020).

2. Build the State from the Bottom Up Before Building It from the Top Down

Instead of focusing on building central institutions (the army, police, and judiciary), which are often distant from citizens, priority should be given to supporting local institutions (municipalities, villages, tribes, and customary institutions), and then building the central state as an overarching framework for these local institutions. This bottom-up approach is more sustainable and less vulnerable to collapse. (Menkhaus, 2014; Boege & Rinck, 2021).

3. Activate African Mechanisms

Instead of relying on ready-made Western prescriptions (from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations), existing African mechanisms should be strengthened: the African Union (AU), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), and the Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and IGAD). These mechanisms are closer to local contexts and enjoy greater legitimacy than Western institutions. (Tull, 2021; Adetula, Bereketeab & Obi, 2022).

4. Link Aid to Progress in Historical Reconciliation

Instead of linking aid to current fragility indicators (which measure symptoms), it should be linked to indicators of progress in historical reconciliation through recognition of past injustices, prosecution of perpetrators, compensation for victims, and reform of the institutions responsible for violations. (Pospisil & Bell, 2022).

5. Long-Term Investment

State-building in Africa does not take place within five or ten years. It requires long-term investment extending for at least 20–30 years. Donor countries (the United States, Europe, China, and the Gulf states) should commit themselves to stable, long-term financing rather than short-term projects tied to electoral cycles in their own countries. (Paris, 2004; Risse & Krasner, 2022).

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Scatter Plot of the Relationship Between State Fragility and GDP per Capita in Africa.	Figure	Figure (2)