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POLICY BRIEF

Fragility, Institutions, and Fiscal Policy – A Critical Review

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Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

- Policy engagement with fiscal governance[1] in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS) has taken on greater salience in recent years amongst major international actors. This includes a recognition that fiscal governance is undertaken by a broad swathe of state and non-state actors, armed and otherwise.

- Analysing and engaging with political dynamics is critical to the success of these efforts. However, existing tools tend to focus on the interests and incentives of elites and their respective constituents.

- Policymakers also need to analyse the broader implications of fiscal practices on institutional patterns of conflict and fragility, including ongoing relationships between powerholders and people, broad social cohesion, and the production of civic culture. Fiscal practices also interact with and shape institutions in other sectors, such as security and justice, or service delivery.

- As such, engagement should be informed by analysis that goes beyond the current structure of interests and incentives amongst elites and their constituents. In particular, it should also include observations about the interplay between historic governance, fiscal, and legal structures, societal norms, and contemporary fiscal behaviour.

- In addition, at least some elements of policy interventions should be designed to channel the relational effects that come from these institutions – such as horizontal and vertical trust. This might involve supporting reform coalitions to engage in state-society bargaining over fiscal governance and policy.

- This should be complemented by realistic expectations about the timeframes for policy reform. Expecting sophisticated fiscal reforms in short-time frames is likely to create policies that mimic the form of fiscal institutions in wealthier and more stable states (i.e. the way institutions look), without replicating their function (i.e. the way they work).

- Finally, if aid budgets continue to narrow, there may also be greater pressure to mobilise alternative sources of investment in FCAS, such as the private sector. There may be a need for new narratives and strategies of engagement, to ensure sensitivity to the institutional effects of these investments on fragility and conflict.

Introduction

In this policy brief, we focus on fiscal governance in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). Fiscal governance has a fundamental role in producing the core institutions of social and political life, as decades of institutionalist research has shown. As such, money – and how it operates as a "public" resource – is fundamental to understanding the political economy of FCAS, not just as a contextual factor that shapes the character of conflict/fragility, but also a source of institutions. Through a series of critical reflections on these insights, this policy brief reviews the current trajectory of international engagement with the fiscal dimensions of conflict and fragility, and outlines recommendations that may improve the way reform actors think and work politically on fiscal arrangements, in pursuit of different objectives.

Our emphasis on institutions – the formal and informal 'rules of the game' that help structure political, social, and economic life – builds on the axiom that they are central to trajectories into and out of fragility and conflict. This axiom is changing donor engagement and programming in FCAS. When donors operate in FCAS in sectors or along themes, there is now broad recognition that they produce not only sectoral or thematic outcomes; they also shape, generate, change – and sometimes undermine – institutional arrangements through this activity, with direct effects on fragility and conflict. This is particularly evident in some sectors, where institutions themselves are the object of activity: justice and security, for example (Desai, Woolcock and Isser, 2012). But it is also evident in the delivery of basic services (which can have spillovers for administrative institutions), or the distribution of food, or the mechanisms for revenue collection and expenditure. This implies – for those seeking to engage effectively in FCAS – the importance of a full understanding of institutional effects within sectors, as well as analytical and conceptual tools to understand the dynamic relationships between them. At the same time, analytical and conceptual sensitivity to the institutional dimensions of sectoral work is uneven. Some sectoral work can be siloed, and/or technocratic, and/or concerned with the immediate efficacy of the work but not its institutional consequences. Work on fiscal governance demonstrates these features.

In terms of strategic prioritisation, policy engagement with fiscal governance in FCAS has taken on greater salience in recent years amongst major international actors. In 2020, the World Bank increased concessional resources to FCAS and adopted a new strategy to support countries affected by conflict (World Bank, 2020). For the first time in its history, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) now also has a dedicated strategy to help country authorities respond to economic challenges associated with fragility and conflict (IMF, 2023). Both the African Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank are aligned with global priorities to address fragility and support resilience. And as part of its commitment to monitor fragility and conflict risks globally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) now tracks changing volumes of government revenues, private investments, and remittances in FCAS (OECD, 2020).

Alongside greater prioritisation, there is also a wider conversation unfolding about the objectives and substance of policy reforms. For national elites in fragile settings, the main political concerns in the fiscal space tend to revolve around fiscal stability as a means to ensure regime security, and so budgets are dominated by recurrent expenditures and payroll. On the reform side, the policy discussion on fiscal governance in FCAS has traditionally been dominated by economists concerned with fiscal stability, equity or economic efficiency (Moore, 2007). Whilst these are still core objectives for international engagement, there is also now a growing literature, and an increasingly active policy conversation, on the connections between fiscal practices, conflict, and broader political, social, and governance dynamics and objectives.

We welcome this overall trajectory, and in particular the departure from principally technocratic approaches to fiscal reform. However, at the international level, firewalls still exist between technical advisors working on fiscal and monetary policy, on the one hand, and governance, conflict, and peacebuilding advisors, on the other. There is an urgent need, within international reform actors, for franker engagement with the trade-offs between fiscal policy measures and institutional patterns that sustain, or potentially augment, the divers of conflict and fragility. In this brief, we argue for greater consideration of the role of historic institutional patterns and broader sociological factors, within policy analysis and engagement with the politics of fiscal governance in FCAS.

Fiscal Governance and Fragility

There are many dimensions to state fragility,[2] but weak fiscal governance is generally regarded as a central feature. Governments in FCAS often have difficulty collecting taxes, and as such they tend to rely on only a few revenue sources. Revenue structures that are poorly diversified are more vulnerable to shocks – which can weaken state resilience. This, in turn, can encourage governments to resort to inflation taxes, or other less transparent ways of acquiring resources – which can weaken state legitimacy. Moreover, using more selective forms of taxation can enhance polarisation between different groups of citizens – which can undermine societal cohesion. These challenges are generally compounded by other factors, including security concerns and government instability. As a result, most fragile states struggle to achieve secure and stable tax revenues that can be administered easily, and to manage their budget resources to meet their basic spending needs and deliver services (Besley and Mueller, 2021).

Cognisant of these challenges, international organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as bilateral donors, have long provided policy advice to FCAS, with respect to central fiscal functions. In line with their mandates, they have focused principally on the technical aspects of fiscal reforms – how taxes are levied and collected; the architecture of the ministries; how to gain control over the budget, and so on. If and when countries become more stable, this advice shifts to medium-term goals, such as improving the design of major taxes or introducing budgeting and IT systems to support public financial management (PFM).

Alongside this technical policy agenda, there is growing appreciation of the more overtly political and sociological aspects to fiscal governance. Fiscal practices and institutions – whether in fragile or more stable contexts – are not just significant in an economic sense, but also lie at the centre of contracts between governing authorities and citizens. Taxation is particularly important, in principle, for relations between state and society, because it requires the consent of citizens. As Di John puts it, "taxation is a nexus that binds together state and citizens" in a way that funds raised through other means do not (Di John, 2010). As such, in addition to more traditional, technocratic concerns with efficiency – for example, how to raise the greatest amount of revenue as quickly as possible and at the lowest cost – the policy conversation in FCAS is shifting to longer-term, more political issues – how to structure fiscal governance in ways that not only improve the state's institutional capacity, but also reinforce a social contract by promoting greater responsiveness and accountability.

The Politics of Fiscal Governance and Reform

In the theoretical and historic literature, many of the principles that are said to shape the relationship between fiscal practices and broader institutional dynamics are drawn from the emergence of states in Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries. For our purposes, there are four common observations worth noting: [3]

- a critical driver of institutional transformation has been the need to expand revenue collection to meet fiscal demands – often of war, but also other demands, such as the maintenance of Empire, or to manage a population bulge;
- the states that succeeded in this period and place were those that shifted the administration of their fiscal affairs from personal and informal systems towards institutional bureaucracy;
- as fiscal management shifted from a non-coercive, private matter to a more consensual, public one, checks and balances emerged to control the executive's use of public funds, culminating in modern institutions of financial oversight and accountability;
- these changes to fiscal institutions spurred the creation of more capable and legitimate states.

Unlike earlier emerging European states, fragile states today typically have access to sources of revenue that incentivise a variety of forms of institutional capacity, oversight and accountability, including natural resource revenues, highly liquid international capital markets, and international aid. Whilst these funding sources can deliver significant returns, they may disincentivise fragile states from mobilising domestic revenues, or spending in ways that respond to the needs of citizens (Moore, 2004; Di John, 2010).

Both the World Bank and IMF fragility strategies, mentioned earlier, advocate for nuanced, country-specific approaches to fiscal policy formulation, emphasising the need for flexible, risk-based, and sustained engagements that adapt to changing conditions. They resist advocating for a 'standard' package of fiscal reform methods in fragile environments. Instead, there is scope for policy experimentation and addressing opportunities that are specific to each context.

In addition, political economy analysis (PEA) is increasingly central to the policy statements and strategies that articulate international engagement with fiscal governance. However, these frameworks tend to focus heavily on the interests and incentives of elites and their respective constituents, and how these shape the behaviour and the functions of institutions. The World Bank, for example, acknowledges that adapting its support to the conditions that characterise fragility requires "sensitivity to the political economy and to managing the incentives of various actors, especially spoilers" (World Bank, 2020: 9). The IMF, meanwhile, states that helping country authorities in FCAS achieve better macroeconomic outcomes means "calibrating the pace and timing of structural reforms to political economy dynamics and institutional capacities", with an explicit focus on the incentives and constraints that can be expected to influence a government's interest in fiscal reforms (IMF, 2022: 2).

As other authors have observed (see, for example, Hudson and Leftwich, 2013), the emphasis on incentives and interests within contemporary political economy frameworks speaks to a particular conception of political agency and motivation, and its relationship to institutions. There is an assumption that individuals or groups are actors who will consistently seek to maximise the benefits that accrue to them from different policy or bargaining opportunities. Institutions, on this view, are the embodiment of incentives that determine the actions of political actors, and thus outcomes.

This passes over the insight that appropriate policy interventions also need to factor in much broader and fundamental social issues that emerge from and then condition fiscal governance. For example, Besley (2019) argues that particular *trusting relationships* between government and governed, and a sense of shared civic identity, are critical in building fiscal capacity, and especially so in contemporary FCAS. In his analysis, for a broad culture of tax compliance to emerge, citizens must believe that the state will pursue common purposes, rather than operate as a private fiefdom. Willingness to comply with taxes is likely stronger where citizens identify more with the revenue-raising collective, and where there is greater trust that the state will deliver adequate reciprocity by providing public goods. These observations are also echoed in Benson's (2023) analysis of the politics of taxation in Sudan. He argues that improvements in revenue transparency have potential to increase government legitimacy and more constructive civic behaviour, in so far as those improvements support public authority based on consent.

Whatever the specific prescriptive elements of these analyses – trust, civic identity, transparency etc. – they all speak to the fundamentally relational qualities of fiscal practices. In other words, fiscal practices shape enduring social relationships between people and with powerholders in ways which are not easily reduced to or analysed in terms of particular interests and incentives. Take *trust*. A case can be made that trust is more accurately thought of as a dynamic quality that emerges through repeated and patterned interactions between actors over time, rather than an outcome of rational calculation or an assessment of interests. This has long been a standard observation in organisational sociology: trust "is neither chosen nor embedded, but is instead learned and reinforced as a product of ongoing interaction and discussion" (Powell, 1996: 63). Approaches to the politics of fiscal governance that focus exclusively or principally on the current structure of interests and incentives amongst elites are unlikely to capture adequately these relational factors.

Moreover, we can see from empirical accounts that the factors that influence trust in fiscal institutions in FCAS often reflect a long evolutionary history of political relationships. In Liberia, for example, a history of exploitative logging concessions and taxation is said to have bred an aversion toward taxation in the local population, especially among indigenous tribes (USAID, 2023). In other instances, historic events and subsequent patterns can help to account for institutional behaviour in the present-day. Prichard (2010), for example, cites the example of Chile, which has been more successful in growing its revenue base than neighbouring countries. In addition to a number of technocratic tax reforms, he identifies processes in the 1990s during the transition from dictatorship, where representatives from across the political spectrum were invited to establish an inclusive fiscal pact with broad agreement on the contours of tax and expenditure policy. These examples underscore the importance, when designing fiscal policies, of not only understanding how different actors regard their interests, but also the potentially enduring effects of institutional forms and legacies, which in part help explain the structure and content of those interests.

These examples add a perspective to assumptions about political action and identity that differs from those threaded through much contemporary PEA. As an example of the latter, consider the idea of a 'political marketplace'. The political marketplace is described as a set of institutions "run on the basis of personal transactions in which political services and allegiances are exchanged for material reward in a competitive manner" (de Waal, 2016: 1). As such, within this framework, revenue, and finance more broadly, function mainly as constraints on the nature of political bargains.

By contrast, institutional sociologists have built an understanding of institutions around concepts like collective habit formation. Habits and routines “compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways whatever they may wish to do – not indeed by destroying their freedom of choice but by shaping the choosing mentalities and by narrowing the list of possibilities from which to choose” (Schumpeter, 1942: 129–30). In this mode of analysis, finances actively generate or constitute social habits and patterns, as well as constraining bargains.

In the final sub-section, we reflect on how reform actors might start to integrate these observations into their approaches to fiscal governance reform in FCAS.

Policy Implications

Our analysis implies that policymakers need to take seriously the broader implications of fiscal practices on institutional patterns of conflict and fragility. The importance of flexible approaches to fiscal policy formulation, and politically-informed engagement that adapts to changing conditions and incentives, is widely accepted amongst donors, multilateral organisations, and reformers within national governments. However, despite recent commitments to adopt more conflict-sensitive and politically-responsive approaches, and wide recognition of the need for better integration of political and economic analysis in policy-making, the major multilaterals and investments banks do not systematically consider the impact of fiscal recommendations on conflict dynamics or broader governance patterns.

Moreover, this space for policy flexibility focuses on fiscal policy and activity as a crucial contextual factor for bargains, peace processes, and institutionalised settlements. But fiscal activity not only intersects with the rules and institutions that, as is now well-recognised, are so central to conflict and peace dynamics (WDR, 2011). Fiscal practices are also key to generating the institutions that can underpin transitions out of fragility and violence. From the perspective sketched above, institutional change takes place when actors overcome or shift previously existing collective routines. This implies that at least some elements of policy engagement with fiscal governance in FCAS should be designed to shape the patterns, habits, and potentially long-term relational factors that underpin the institutional environment of fragility and conflict.

Mindful of the reflections above on the significance of context, it is important to resist particular templates or blueprints for what these policies might look like. However, we conclude with some broad suggestions to guide *analytics, operations, and organisational approaches.*

Analytics

To design politically smart reforms to fiscal governance in FCAS (or anywhere), we need a rich and detailed understanding of the broad fiscal history of the context in question. This analysis should go beyond the current structure of interests and incentives amongst elites and their constituents. In particular, it should also include observations about the interplay between historic governance, fiscal, and legal structures, societal norms, and contemporary fiscal behaviour.

The idea of institutions as collective habits and patterns also suggests that we need to pay close attention to how practices (whether fiscal, legal, administrative, or pertaining to some other domain) help generate institutions and the forms they take, and thus help structure the exercise of authority. For example, how do the institutions generated by fiscal activity in FCAS interact with justice, security, and service delivery institutions? Under what conditions do conflicts play out in one or another domain, and with what effects on the durability of institutions? How should donors reconcile the need for conflict-sensitive and politically-feasible fiscal reforms in FCAS, with the need to also challenge the institutions and power structures that sustain undesirable governance dynamics (for example, large-scale corruption), and pursue more transformative results over the long-term?

Operations

How might policy-makers draw on the more sociological understanding of institutional formation outlined above to generate more holistic (and thus more effective) policy interventions? As noted above, it is increasingly argued in the literature on tax compliance that bargaining between citizens and governments over fiscal policy can provide a foundation for the development of more responsive and accountable governance, and thus more trusting state-society relations. In our view, the fragmentation of governance and authority in FCAS means this bargaining needs to include a broad but carefully-configured group of stakeholders. In that light, there may be advantages in supporting issue-based reform coalitions that bring together otherwise disparate stakeholders to bargain with the state over particular policies – for example, different sections of the business or civic community, or different ethnic groups, that are subject to similar fiscal constraints.[4]

A more sociological and historic approach to analysis and engagement with fiscal governance should be complemented by more realistic expectations about the timeframes for policy reform. As noted by Miller et al. (2017), historic accounts of the development of fiscal states in Europe emphasise that several centuries elapsed before they were fully institutionalised, and major reforms were often separated by several decades. Expecting sophisticated reforms in much shorter timeframes is unrealistic, and likely to create policies that mimic the form of institutions in wealthier and more stable states (i.e. the way institutions look), without replicating their function (i.e. the way they work).

Organisations

Navigating the politics and constraints of organisations and bureaucracies will continue to be critical to successful engagement with fiscal governance in FCAS, especially in the recent aftermath of the latest shifts in the development landscape and reductions in aid. In that light, individual and collective reform actors working on fiscal governance will need to create space for thorough political analysis, appropriate forms of policy experimentation, and managed risk-taking within their own agencies and organisations. This could involve identifying specific 'pinch points' or leverage points within and across organisations where research and evidence can be most effectively channeled to influence practice.

Finally, if the space for conventional large-scale forms of financial aid and technical assistance continues to narrow, there may be growing pressure to secure investment in FCAS from other sources, such as the private sector. Should that trend gain pace, international actors and reformers within national governments may need to develop narratives and strategies of engagement with private sector counterparts, to try to ensure sensitivity to the institutional effects of their investments, from the perspective of conflict and fragility.

Endnotes

[1] We use the term 'fiscal governance' to refer to the formal and informal institutions (rules and norms) that structure how public money is raised and spent.

[2] Fragility is a contested concept. While it lacks a universally agreed definition, it is often understood as a combination of citizen and societal exposure to risks, and insufficient capacity of the state or community to manage or mitigate those risks (OECD, 2016; 2020; World Bank, 2020). Risks can be understood in terms of organised, armed, and/or politically motivated violence; and/or risks related to broader social, economic, or environmental factors. Fragility tends to be understood as complex and multidimensional, with causes and implications that cut across a range of factors (OECD, 2008).

[3] Here, we draw principally on Schumpeter (1918) Tilly (1990), Moore (2004), Brautigam (2008) and Krause (2013).

[4] Evidence from both relatively stable contexts like Kyrgyzstan (see Laws and Rinnert, 2022), as well as more fragmented and violent settings like Northeast Nigeria (Laws et al., 2021), suggest this kind of policy engagement has the potential to disrupt well-established institutional patterns of fiscal governance. Similarly, Benson (2023) argues in favour of bottom-up, demand-led civic engagement as a promising approach to tax policy reform in Sudan, including through coalitions that knit together civic activists, neighbourhood committees, pastoralists groups, and other grassroots organisations.

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