CGD Note
JAN 2020

Center for Global Development

Creating an Accountability Framework that Serves the Global Fragility Act's Mission

Susanna Campbell, Dan Honig, and Sarah Rose

In the final days of 2019, Congress passed the Global Fragility Act, an ambitious bill that aims to improve how the US government approaches stabilizing conflict-affected states and preventing the escalation of violence in other fragile contexts. Introduced by a coalition of lawmakers from both sides of the aisle in the House and Senate—led by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel (D-NY) and Senator Chris Coons (D-DE)—a version of the legislation was passed by the House this spring and boasted 26 cosponsors in the Senate. The Global Fragility Act's final passage, as part of a large FY2020 spending bill, is a testament to bipartisan commitment and cooperation.

The Global Fragility Act asks the State Department to create—jointly with USAID, the Department of Defense, and other agencies—a coordinated, coherent strategy to help prevent violence in fragile states and stabilize conflict-affected areas. As overseers of the taxpayer funds that will be used to implement the act, Congress also included several provisions to hold these agencies to account for achieving results. Accountability for results is important, especially when overseers are far removed from implementation. But how accountability is structured matters quite a bit. When accountability frameworks revolve largely around tight controls and reporting against targets, their good intentions can backfire and contribute to ineffective programming, especially in fragile states.

To ensure that the Global Fragility Act's accountability requirements support rather than undermine the act's laudable goals, the monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes that accompany the act's implementation must accomplish two linked but fundamentally distinct things. They must be able to satisfy Washington-based overseers' reporting needs while also providing projects the space needed for locally informed adaptive management and learning (or continuous adjustment aimed at achieving transformative aims in a dynamic context), which is associated with better outcomes in fragile states. The Global Fragility Act offers an opportunity to rethink the tools through which aid agencies pursue accountability. This note explains how tight controls and target-oriented reporting can negatively affect outcomes in fragile states and offers some initial recommendations for creating a stronger, outcome-oriented accountability framework.

A HOPEFUL WAY FORWARD

The Global Fragility Act laudably learns from three decades of US involvement in fragile states and mandates a foundational shift in the way that the United States engages in these contexts. Notably, the act calls for new attention to *preventing* the outbreak of violence—rather than spending billions of dollars fire-fighting wars—and addressing the root causes of violence where it emerges. The act authorizes $1.15 billion over the next five years for conflict prevention and stabilization activities.

Equally importantly, the act also seeks to alleviate some of the funding, policy, and bureaucratic constraints that have hampered US engagement in fragile states in the past. In particular, for each of at least five priority countries or regions that will be designated by the White House, the act calls on the State Department, in coordination with USAID and other agencies, to lead the development of 10-year interagency plans that promote policy coherence among development, diplomatic, and defense actors. These plans are also to focus on longer-term objectives (like stronger governance, institutions, and social cohesion) rather than quick wins that are often unsustainable—and can sometimes even be at odds with longer-term goals. The act also requests that implementing agencies demonstrate better coordination with other donors and challenges the agencies to better engage, support, and empower local actors. And, of course, it includes provisions for accountability to politicians and government officials in DC for achieving the act's worthy aims.

With the bill's passage, our collective sights now turn to implementation. The State Department and USAID, which have lived the lessons that inspired the Global Fragility Act, undoubtedly welcome Congress's authorization of funding for conflict prevention and support for longer-term reforms. But fragile state environments are complex, and bureaucratic practices—both within and across agencies—won't shift overnight, so translating the intent of the Global Fragility Act into practice doesn't promise to be easy.

One of the keys to the success of the act, as well as one of its greatest challenges, will be to develop better ways of holding the implementing agencies accountable for achieving local outcomes in the selected focus countries or regions. Accountability frameworks—that is, how agencies and their staff in the field are asked to prove they're doing good work—often revolve around prescribed targets and tight controls. Trying to demonstrate effectiveness in this way can itself be *a cause* of ineffectiveness—particularly in fragile states. In this note we explain how the Global Fragility Act's monitoring and evaluation requirements provide mixed directions that have the potential to undermine their good intentions and offer some recommendations for how to ensure accountability practices support rather than undermine the act's goals.

HOW TIGHT CONTROLS CAN STRANGLE RESULTS

In the name of accountability, donors often put tight controls around their programs, including setting targets for what implementers should achieve and the steps they should take to achieve them. But it's often not possible to know at the outset of a program how best to achieve the desired outcomes. This is especially true in fragile states, where fluid conditions can quickly change both the country context and the specific institutions of state and society that the aid program is attempting to alter. This is *even more true* precisely for the types of interventions the Global Fragility Act encourages—those that seek to address the underlying drivers of fragility.

For projects addressing drivers of fragility like malign governance, weak institutions, and social exclusion, there are few good, countable and reportable, measures of success. We're unlikely to see impact in the short-term and can rarely attribute results to a single, discrete program. The performance indicators for projects targeting those objectives often end up being mere proxies (and not always good ones) for the real goal of improved governance/strengthened institutions/inclusion. Yet implementers are often beholden to these proxy indicators and end up orienting their project toward them because their funding depends on meeting targets. This puts them at risk of hitting the target but missing the point.

Targets are *all the more* problematic in the fragile—and thus relatively unstable and unpredictable—places on which the Global Fragility Act focuses. Without careful attention to how interventions—even those that meet all their targets—interact with conflict dynamics, aid can inadvertently reinforce rather than mitigate the root causes of violence and instability. "Missing the point" in fragile states can, thus, be especially costly.

Two of us (Dan and Susanna) have spent years grappling with how accountability systems can support rather than undermine project performance, particularly in fragile states—and we're far from the only ones concerned. Dan's research and his 2018 book, *Navigation by Judgment: Why and When Top Down Management of Foreign Aid Doesn't Work*, demonstrate that when donors are tightly prescriptive about projects and focused on achieving pre-set targets, they undermine program performance by restricting how the skills, knowledge, and creativity of those based in the field are brought to bear to solve evolving problems on the ground. This is shown to be particularly true in less predictable environments like fragile states. The very accountability systems that are supposed to help ensure "value for money" end up reducing "value."

Susanna's research and recent book, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding*, show that locally informed adaptive learning is necessary for effective peacebuilding, and that top-down donor accountability undermines this learning. Drawing on research in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, South Sudan, and Sudan, she finds that continuous feedback and buy-in from a wide range of local stakeholders is necessary for donors to foster more inclusive institutions in fragile states. The main challenge is that this local accountability often requires country-based staff to bypass or ignore headquarter demands that prioritize global targets over local outcomes. Successful peacebuilding, thus, depends on rule-breaking or rule-bending behavior by country-based staff who prioritize local stakeholder needs over their headquarters' top-down requirements.

THE DUALITY OF THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT'S ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACH

Because the fundamental purpose of the Global Fragility Act is to increase the effectiveness of engagement in fragile states, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) efforts are a natural focus for the bill. The challenge facing these MEL efforts is to help the Global Fragility Act provide Congress with visibility into the results that it wants to see and, simultaneously, enable programming that responds to needs on the ground.

The Global Fragility Act deserves great credit for its recognition that program planning and implementation in fragile states must be more flexible, adaptable, and responsive to changes in local context. Many recognize that USAID awards, in particular, have become increasingly prescriptive over the years, making them less well-suited for effective implementation in fragile contexts. USAID does have its long-standing Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting framework that has provided quality guidance, tools, and encouragement to missions to build these practices into their programming,

but it hasn't been adopted systematically. The agency is putting new momentum behind these efforts, however, promising in its 2018 Acquisition and Assistance Strategy that more projects will include more adaptive management. The Global Fragility Act's endorsement of adaptive programming provides additional motivation for USAID's renewed focus. This support is particularly important since fear of resistance from congressional overseers—who are typically less familiar with USAID's underused, more flexible tools—has been one factor that has, in the past, discouraged their uptake.

But at the same time as the Global Fragility Act encourages adaptive, flexible programming, it also calls for reports to Congress, every two years, on progress made toward achieving specific targets, metrics, and indicators for each priority country and region. This is a standard requirement for congressional overseers whose role is to ensure taxpayer funds are well used. Nonetheless, in this instance, by defining its role as a monitor of targets, Congress may inadvertently limit its ability to support the goals of the Global Fragility Act. So how can aid agencies be held accountable in a way that satisfies overseers' needs to track impact and use of funds, but advances rather than undermines that impact in the process?

WHAT DOES AN EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PARADIGM LOOK LIKE?

The Global Fragility Act—through its focused set of priority countries—offers a rare opportunity to pilot and test new accountability approaches that support both local results and global standards. As a starting point, here are some practical suggestions about how funding and implementing agencies can more effectively integrate accountability for the Global Fragility Act into their strategic plans and program design. These suggestions are meant to ensure Congress and the American public are able to understand how taxpayer dollars are spent, without instituting burdensome accountability requirements that can undermine the effectiveness of those dollars in fragile states.

Be Smart When It Comes to What Gets Reported "Up" to Policymakers in DC

- **Look beyond standard quantitative metrics:** The Global Fragility Act asks agencies to propose the "criteria, metrics, and mechanisms" for monitoring and evaluating its results. While agencies need to propose metrics, they don't need to propose *only* metrics—especially since the real results of many efforts won't be easily quantifiable in standardized global metrics. Agencies should augment standard metrics with locally focused monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that recognize the locus of expertise at the field level—including narrative reports from the field, participatory evaluation approaches, local accountability mechanisms, and bringing country-based implementers into regular discussion with headquarters staff and Congress. For example, if an agency reports on a standard metric about the legitimacy of the country's security forces, such as the number of human rights violations committed by these forces, then locally focused monitoring and evaluation could identify if the population feels the same way and provide detailed descriptions of how and why the security forces operate the way that they do. These locally focused monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are particularly important because quantitative data on sensitive issues are often particularly difficult to gather in fragile states, and because the recipient government may have an incentive to hide abuses or downplay available evidence.

- **Pick a streamlined set of standardized strategic indicators:** While metrics are limited in their ability to convey progress, they do have a role in telling part of the story. They're also a requirement of the Global Fragility Act. So, how do you identify the most meaningful quantitative measures for Congress? More indicators aren't necessarily better. We've all seen projects where so much time is spent collecting, compiling, and reporting on mountains of indicators that there wasn't enough time to do much else (including learn from performance rather than simply pro-

cess data). Fewer, well-chosen standard indicators will enable agency staff and implementing partners to invest more in the types of innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluation that capture the localized conflict-sensitive outcomes that the Global Fragility Act aims to foster. These indicators should focus on measures of longer-term outcomes, if possible, to avoid fixing focus on things that may change or distorting programming incentives.

- **Report outcomes in context:** Effective reporting on outcomes requires placing them in context. And this means getting comfortable with a couple of difficult truths.

  First, when talking about the deep-rooted institutional, governance, and social capital issues that are often at the heart of state fragility, change happens over a long time horizon and often in a nonlinear fashion. The Global Fragility Act's 10-year planning horizon recognizes this, but it will be a critical point to raise when assessing changes in key indicators during regular reporting. Particularly if the few strategic indicators focus on longer-term changes, they may reveal disappointing progress in the short term. These metrics should be considered in the context of the longer-term goals of the Global Fragility Act in that country, the possible incremental progress made toward them, and the numerous challenges that their achievement faces.

  Second, there will often be limited scope for directly attributing observed changes in (often broad) outcome indicators to specific interventions. Aid agencies can, at most, play a supporting role in advancing significant changes in peace, security, governance, and inclusion in fragile states. Agencies will need to be able to situate their contribution within the broader landscape of local policy, security, environmental, and other changes, as well as interventions supported by other donors.

  Reporting outcomes in context will require working backward from the standard strategic metrics that Congress will use to monitor change in the Global Fragility Act's priority countries and asking first, if the context has changed; second, what factors might have contributed to that change; third, if US support might have contributed to that change, and, if so, how the individual programming and diplomatic efforts might have, in combination with domestic and international initiatives, facilitated this change.

- **Report on the process of learning and adaptation via local monitoring, evaluation, and accountability:** Adaptive learning (and management that supports this learning) is necessary for effective interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states and Congress should hold implementing agencies accountable for doing it well. All interventions in these contexts are at least somewhat experimental—no one knows exactly what will prevent violent conflict or rebuild effective state-society relations in a war-torn state. Adaptive learning is also necessary to enable the leaders, bureaucrats, civil society actors, and politicians in the recipient country to create change in their own institutions. Implementers have to figure out what will work in a particular country, with a particular local institution, at a particular point in time, and with the particular local stakeholders involved. They will rarely get this right at first; instead they must learn and adapt as they go, creating buy-in among an inclusive group of stakeholders and challenging their (almost always incorrect) assumptions about what will prevent violent conflict in that particular country at that particular time.

  Not only does this type of adaptive learning in response to changing dynamics on the ground require more flexible programming approaches, it also requires serious efforts to engage in localized monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. It requires deep engagement with—and

learning from—the local institutions that the program aims to influence, co-creating the change that both global and local stakeholders want to see. Local accountability mechanisms could include perceptions surveys, locally led evaluations, or focus groups that help shift accountability to the communities, public servants, or civil society actors most affected by the project.

Because local accountability is so important, it should also be measured and monitored to ensure that it gets done. The Global Fragility Act asks agencies to report on any changes made to programs based on the results of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. It also encourages the type of participatory local engagement in program design, implementation, and monitoring discussed above. Agencies should bring these two things together and ensure their reporting to Congress describes their process of ensuring widespread local input, engagement, accountability, and feedback and how this helped them adapt their programming.

Don't Make Accountability Just About Reporting "Up" to Policymakers in DC

- **Structure monitoring and learning not just for upward accountability but also to enable project performance in complex environments (the two purposes can be linked but aren't the same):** Tracking standardized strategic indicators can help to monitor the dynamics in the recipient country and ensure that US-supported interventions are aligned with the Global Fragility Act's priorities. But to help ensure these interventions are implemented in a way that supports the act's ultimate aim—preventing violent conflict—agencies need to measure and understand their activities in a localized, conflict-sensitive way. Too often, reporting from the mission level emphasizes counting whether or not the decisions made in DC are actually carried out at the country level, rather than capturing whether delivering on these priorities actually achieves the desired local-level change in the fragile state. Mission staff need to develop, jointly with the implementing partner, a set of local, conflict-sensitive indicators that align with desired results, as indicated above (supporting accountability to Congress for the act). But mission staff and implementing partners also need to work together to identify a set of indicators and questions that will allow them to respond and adapt to information about whether the things they are doing are actually enabling the type of change that they want to make (supporting the achievement of outcomes in the fragile state via adaptive management and learning).

  Take, for example, a relatively straightforward infrastructure project—building a bridge. In addition to tracking the status of construction, implementing agencies must also monitor and understand—at the design stage and throughout the implementation process—which groups in society have access to the bridge, which groups benefit from the bridge, which government officials and political parties receive credit for the bridge, and which accountability systems are put in place to ensure the effective management of the bridge by both state and society. This kind of local, conflict-sensitive information helps implementing agencies design interventions that aim to mitigate, rather than exacerbate, fragility and conflict; adapt their interventions to updated information about the evolving context and the effectiveness of their intervention at achieving its aims in the context; and build the relationships and understanding necessary to achieve outcomes that local stakeholders want to sustain.

  In other words, to increase the effectiveness of the Global Fragility Act, its guiding principles—inclusion, improved state-society relations, and government accountability—have to be integrated into the localized monitoring, learning, and adaptation of the interventions it supports. This will require, to some extent, that interveners separate out their monitoring, evaluation,

and learning process from the metrics that Congress wants to track. Intervenors need to monitor their projects so that they can adapt them to the dynamic context and the preferences of local stakeholders. To do so, they need to gather much more detailed data (both quantitative and qualitative) than is necessary for any standardized metric or report for Congress. The process of condensing, framing, and aggregating these data for the required report to Congress is a separate function that should be linked to, but not be confounded with, the local MEL that is necessary for effective programming in fragile states.

- **Invest staff resources in building local relationships:** For meaningful participatory local accountability and engagement, country offices need to engage—and be accountable to—a wide range of local actors. This requires mission staff to expand their networks beyond their standard interlocutors—which will, in turn, support the Global Fragility Act's focus on long-term country-specific progress. To expand their connections, missions need people on the ground who know the country context well, understand local relationships and networks, and are there for long enough to be able to identify stakeholders and build access and trust. This can be hard when American staff rotate every two- to four-years (or even more frequently in more dangerous environments) and argues for empowering foreign service nationals to lead in this role (a nice fit with USAID's new policy framework, which lists empowering foreign service nationals as a priority).

- **Engage Congress regularly—outside of standard reporting cycles—on challenges, approaches, and progress:** Focusing reporting largely on indicator performance misses opportunities for overseers to accompany implementers' efforts to identify the real challenges and opportunities facing interventions in fragile states. Frequent, direct engagement would better allow lawmakers to assess success and failure, rather than having to rely merely on indicator performance. One possible approach is to bring personnel closer together, allowing for more informal and frequent exchanges; e.g. for Congress to do more direct observation, or for someone from USAID's evaluation team to be seconded to oversight committees. Implementing agencies could explore how they can build in more member and staff visits to the field to help Congress understand directly both what implementers of the Global Fragility Act are attempting to do, and where reporting "up" is helpful and where it is a hindrance. Our conversations with USAID and implementing partners, and on the Hill, suggest to us that there is a great deal of shared concern, and an underappreciation of the same; that is, actors who treat one another warily seem to agree on far more than they may imagine. We think more frequent contact is likely to lead to greater mutual understanding, more appropriate accountability practices, and perhaps even greater levels of trust.

- **Shift the relationship between agencies and implementing partners from overseers to collaborators:** Agencies spend huge amounts of time and resources picking the perfect implementing partner; they then spend the next several years clearly conveying that they don't trust them to do their job. The cornerstone of agencies' oversight relationship with partners is quarterly reporting, often centered around progress on key performance indicators. This progress is then rolled up with that of the mission's other programs to create a similarly indicator- and target-focused report back to Washington. The result is a limited—and sometimes misleading—picture of a mission's real results. To get better high-level reporting, it's important to start with a different relationship with the implementer. And here's where the more collaborative relationships that USAID's Acquisition and Assistance Strategy envisions—and which the agency has started to implement—could help. More collaboration could advance mutual trust, allow US government staff to better accompany project implementation, and provide the basis for them to report on progress more comprehensively. Collaborative programming will likely require changes to staffing and evoke new training needs. But the Global Fragility Act seems to provide some scope for agencies to identify what they need to implement the act.

The Global Fragility Act admirably recognizes that there's no blueprint for addressing the drivers of conflict—that much depends on context, which in fragile states is also particularly subject to rapid change. There's no blueprint for what an accountability framework that both satisfies overseers and allows flexibility and localized authority really looks like, either. Achieving the goals of the act requires that we accept that. It also means we need to rethink whether our accountability routines are fit for purpose.

There's much more to be said on this. Watch this space for Dan's forthcoming CGD policy paper, which explores in more detail the steps that donor staff—at various levels—can take to encourage agencies to "Navigate by Judgment." And keep an eye out for Susanna's upcoming piece with Richmond Blake from Mercy Corps (which led the coalition that advocated for the passage of the Global Fragility Act) on what research tells us about the most effective way to implement the Global Fragility Act, as well as her blog with George Ingram at the Brookings Institution on the policy implications of the Global Fragility Act's accountability framework. We hope that these pieces, along with others, collectively help advance a conversation we think is long overdue—one focused on the nitty-gritty of how accountability frameworks can be better aligned with the adaptive, flexible programming to which many aid actors are increasingly committed.

We believe that whatever approach is taken to accountability under the act, that approach itself should also be studied and revisited. Agencies implementing the Global Fragility Act are keenly aware of the limitations of prescriptive controls and have an opportunity to work with Congress to think about how locally oriented adaptative programming and progress reporting can work together. The passage of the Global Fragility Act provides all of us with the opportunity to reflect on how accountability processes can be designed to best advance the shared objective of implementers and Congress: effective programs that help address the drivers of conflict and help give those living in fragile states peaceful, prosperous, and more fulfilling futures. This reflection promises benefits not just to those aided by the act itself but the aid community more broadly.

Center for Global Development
Ideas to Action: Independent research for global prosperity

WWW.CGDEV.ORG

SUSANNA CAMPBELL is an assistant professor at American University and a non-resident research fellow at Mercy Corps.

DAN HONIG is a non-resident fellow at the Center for Global Development.

SARAH ROSE is a policy fellow at the Center for Global Development.

Contact:
Jocilyn Estes, program coordinator,
jestes@cgdev.org