Isabel Rocha de Sequeira

‘FRAGILE STATES’ IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD

The Role of the g7+ in International Diplomacy and Development Cooperation

This is a book about people. ‘Fragile States’ in an Unequal World introduces the members of the g7+, a group formed by 20 conflict-affected states: why they came to believe in politics and policy; how they feel about their work, their family and their communities; and what they want to leave behind for the next generations. It is the story of their personal and collective values, their mistakes, and the challenges they faced, and it will resonate with anyone who has tried to organize and work with a group of very different people.

This book is also a contribution for those seeking to influence international policy, especially from a disadvantageous position. It explores how to find your voice, use your survival skills, work with passion, decide how much to concede and act responsibly. Together, these lessons illuminate the paths that individual members have walked as they found their own voices, as well as how the g7+ fights to speak collectively. The volume ends with a glimpse of the way forward, as Isabel Rocha de Sequeira encourages younger generations to engage with politics and policy generously, with hope for the future.

Combining literature and hard facts – along with other elements such as illustrations and cartoon strips to tell the previously untold stories of public servants in poor, conflict-affected countries – the book offers an original (and very human) micro and macro perspective on the politics of development. It will be of interest to professionals in major development organisations, students and professors in development courses, policymakers, public servants, civil society, activists working for major international NGOs, and journalists who report on the development industry, as well as those with a general interest in international development cooperation, international diplomacy and other related fields.

This is the author-approved edition of this Open Access title. As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to download for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at http://www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Basket-tray from Sudan (2015). Photo by King müh. Design by Katy Saunders.
Fig. 2 Letter from an 11-year-old friend that Siafa Hage received while already living in the US.

Leah Worjoh
Siama Sinkor
Monrovia, Liberia
March 25, 1991

Dear Siafa,

How are you coming on? I pray that you are well.

Before my thoughts lead me though, I want to extend you my deepest sympathy for the death of your father. I ask God to comfort you and all your brothers and the whole family.

During the war, we walked from Siama Sinkor to the safety gone Bushrod Island. We suffered during the war. Many people had swollen feet, people died from hunger, from diseases like cholera and all types. I was very happy that you were not here. I pray that we meet one day. I missed you a lot and pray your guide come back that we can once again come together and enjoy fun.

Brother, and tell them that I wish them God's blessing.

Yours faithfully;

Leah Worjoh
4. How to Work with Passion
On the Value of Doing Things Together

In the Land of the Fisherman

Finding bait is a worry that torments me
But I only have enough for me, and I am young
But truly, I only have enough for me, and I am young
And to be alone in a canoe is to be powerless....

—Song from Comoros Islands.

This is how Missy Stephens, an international advisor who spent quite a long time supporting the Timorese leadership and the initial work of the g7+, describes her expectations about the group at the very beginning: ‘I had been around a lot, supporting international processes, the Millennium Development Goals... and I could see there was a big disconnect. It was clear [that] all that was not helpful. When the g7+ was being created, all I could think was “If the g7+ doesn’t happen, nothing will”, because their existence was a microcosm of everything that was going on with development. The first two years were painful, I didn’t think the group would make it. And I thought all the time, “If they [donors] would only listen! The people who know are the ones who survived. If donors would listen, development might have a chance’.

She was later responsible for inviting over Peter Lloyd, a renowned Australian war correspondent, to lead the group’s communication team.

This was all news to Peter: ‘I had no idea what the g7+ was about. But then I realized it was about social justice. It was social justice in action.

---

1 In Said Ahmed, Moussa & Walker, Iain (2011). ‘Two Fisherman’s Songs’. Wasari, 26(2), p. 60.
2 Interview with Missy Stephens, 12 March 2020.

© 2022 Isabel Rocha de Siqueira, CC BY-NC 4.0  https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0311.04
I didn’t go in with that impression, but that’s how I left’. Nevertheless, in our conversations, Peter’s was perhaps the most critical voice, and this says a lot. Peter finished his contract frustrated by the lack of more robust changes. I think it is important to start with that, even if it sounds oddly negative, precisely because working with passion is vital for certain lines of work, but it has its own difficulties. Although Peter suggests that changes on the ground, and structural transformations, did not happen as much as he would have liked, nevertheless at the end of our conversation he says that the worst that can happen is for the g7+ to adopt the managerialism he sees elsewhere: ‘Managerialism is toxic. We need to have a conversation about values in those rooms’. The reason I start with Missy and Peter, who are not part of our main cohort of characters, is that, being born into American and Australian cultural codes, theirs is a peculiar position when they speak of what the g7+ is not and should not be: more business-as-usual.

Along with the promise of alternative solutions and the constant passionate undertone is always the fact that ‘alternatives’ and passion are bound to fall short in fulfilling their promises. Yet, without that, there might be no changes at all. I find it useful here to remember what a long-time critic of business as usual once said: ‘The world needs to build all possible strategies that allow [us] to lay down the ground for change...That change will not come if we simply wait for developed countries to solve their problems, forgetting about the interdependent and unequal nature of the international economy’. To build ‘all possible strategies’ when these are so often insufficient or even stillborn requires considerable motivation and courage. But then, the world is full of good intentions and little change. How do we judge which alternatives are worth a passionate investment?

When the g7+ was established, its overall ambitions were big: ‘The g7+ was formed to work in concert with international actors, the private sector, civil society, the media and the people across countries, borders and regions to reform and reinvent a new paradigm for international engagement’. Moreover, the specific goal with which the g7+ was

---

3 Peter Lloyd.
4 Acosta, Alberto (2018). O Bem Viver. São Paulo: Editora Elefante, p. 218 (my translation).
5 g7+ brochure (English version).
founded was ‘to stop conflict, build nations and eradicate poverty through innovative development strategies, harmonized to the country context, aligned to the national agenda and led by the State and its People’.\(^6\) That meant that the group wanted to both achieve important changes on the ground—especially since member countries had been suffering heavily with poverty, conflict, and violence—and to fundamentally modify donor behaviour, making cooperation in international development more equal and changing the narrative around ‘fragility’ to focus more on taking ownership of issues and on national leadership.\(^7\) Even if one were to narrow these objectives down to a few practical and specific issues or targets, they would still be very difficult to attain.

Anyone trying to address the many obstacles to peace and happiness (it seems this word applies better than ‘stability’) in the 20 g7+ member countries will have to be driven by some kind of strong purpose, and will require support, peer-learning, an exchange of experiences and much solidarity, at least on the part of those whom one considers ‘brothers and sisters’ in their common trajectories. Indeed, there are many things one normally does not do alone. Being in a room full of ‘international experts’, for instance, can be a lonely experience, so one would be grateful for reinforcements, a sympathetic face pushing one to intervene, or to break protocols or expectations, if necessary. ‘It happened often: when one of them [g7+ representatives] got into a room for a meeting, it would be one of them and dozens of donor representatives. We were always fighting to make it more even’, Missy recalls.\(^8\) This is coming from a former advisor to the g7+, but it is widely acknowledged by others as well, including inside major organisations. A World Bank senior officer once told me of a situation that arose when she lived in in Timor-Leste: ‘Once I asked: “Do you really want that matrix?”. The person said: “There are twelve donors here, it’s easier if I just agree”’.\(^9\) That same officer later left the World Bank, disappointed at living through many situations like this, and went to work in civil society.

---

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2019). Op. cit.
\(^8\) Interview with Missy Stephens, 12 March 2020.
\(^9\) This is an excerpt from Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2017). Op. cit., p. 123. Anonymous interview conducted in 2013.
In general, the overall feeling when the g7+ was founded was not only that the solutions presented by ‘experts’ were often ineffective, but that their attitude needed a major overhaul—from micro-practices to larger agendas. Former Prime Minister of Timor-Leste and Eminent Person of the g7+ Xanana Gusmão, even with all his diplomatic experience, said at the time: ‘[I]t has been our experience that aid delivery can be inflexible and process-heavy, resulting in funds being spent in the wrong places and not able to be used to prevent emerging conflict that threatens the State. We have also had to deal with development “experts” seeking to impose their supply-driven or template solutions with little regard for our culture, our context and the reality of our country’.¹⁰

Facing that reality, all the people we spoke with in the g7+ listed the biggest achievement of the group as raising a unified voice for conflict-affected countries on the international stage. In second place is usually

¹⁰ Gusmão, K.R.X. (2011). ‘Opening Speech’, g7+ Ministerial Retreat, Juba, South Sudan, 18 October 2011 quoted in Strength in Fragility, p. 1. On the issues of partnership, participation and ownership, see Crewe, Emma & Harrison, Elizabeth (1998). Whose Development? An Ethnography of Aid. London and New York: Zed Books; Mosse, David & Lewis, David (eds) (2005). The Aid Effect: Giving and Governing in International Development. London: Pluto Press; Mosse, David (2005). Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice. London: Pluto Press; Edelman, Marc & Haugerud, Angelique (eds) (2005). The Anthropology of Development and Globalization: From Classical Political Economy to Contemporary Neoliberalism. Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
the sharing of experiences among countries that have much to learn from each other. Herman Kakule Mukululuki, Director of External Resources Coordination at the Ministry of Planning in DRC, for instance, indicated that one of the g7+‘s main realizations was the very fact that fragile states have been grouped together in solidarity in order to debate their common challenges.\footnote{Interview with Herman Kakule Mukululuki, 10 June 2019.} This perceived feat, in fact, has a double aspect to it: not only is the g7+ said to have unified the voices of (some) conflict-affected states in certain contexts, but people speak of a ‘voice’ precisely because the group is also credited with having created space for that voice to be uttered in different international fora, even if to a limited extent and with frequent setbacks.

There are undoubtedly many limitations to what the g7+ did achieve or can achieve still, as a group and as a collective of individuals. But if, as in the verses above, ‘to be alone is to be powerless’, the feat of finding company cannot be discarded as part of a search for alternatives. Again, the means are relevant—creating bonds and finding commonalities—not only because otherwise, these professionals might simply give up on their work, but mostly because the work they do keeps certain policies afloat, and their absence might mean worse lives for people in these countries. Seeking and cherishing company with passion and solidarity is not for everyone everywhere, but there is a lot be said for what it can achieve.

Togetherness Is a Value and a Practice: Harnessing Commonalities in Order to Move Forward

‘One needs three magic words: persistence, perseverance and dedication,’ says Helder. ‘Doing that kind of work, of course I ask myself all the time “Why am I doing this? Is it for the good of all or for personal glory?” You have to make sure. I keep in touch with the focal points; I try to bring that sense of togetherness’.\footnote{Interview with Helder da Costa, 14 April 2020.} Of course this is not easily done. Helder has shared examples before of how difficult it can be to keep up with focal points, the national representatives for the routine work the g7+ requires, and with what is going on in each other’s countries. In a
famous case, he mentions how ‘[i]n a euphoric party after the g7+ Busan meeting, Guinea-Bissau’s Minister of Economy, Planning and Regional Integration, Helena Nosoline Embaló, graciously offered on behalf of her country to host the g7+ ministerial meeting in 2012’. He continues: ‘In New York earlier in the year, we became concerned for her safety during unrest in her country, but were relieved to find that she was well, but had been detained and was unable to leave her country’.\(^{13}\) There were other cases he mentioned back in 2012, when the group was facing tough growing pains: ‘One of our “focal points” from Somalia recently avoided a suicide bombing that injured others who were with him. At each event, our Afghan friends overcome many challenges to be with us. And yet each time they turn up with determination, enthusiasm and a smile. I am indeed very proud of our g7+ family’.\(^{14}\)

It is not surprising, then, that being together might itself have a different weight and dynamic when it comes to g7+ meetings.

‘Coming from a conflict-affected country, having seen war, starvation, you know people want to live in peace’, Helder says. Of course, that accords with the g7+’s stated purpose of seeking peace in their countries. It also might indicate how much people in the group tend to value the positive moments of joy, safety and tranquillity and why that is something they see as natural, even if takes some time to assimilate for a newcomer. For Naheed, attending a g7+ meeting for the first time, the informality was surprising: ‘Even though the meeting itself was a formal setting, the context was so informal; that’s not usual. I had experience with these meetings, aid conferences, discussing pledges, conditionalities, negotiating. That experience is usually rigorous, involves many hours’ sitting’. Naheed had been meeting donors and discussing aid for years, but said the atmosphere in these meetings is different. True, anyone coming into the restaurant where the welcome dinner was held on the first night would not have guessed those on the dance floor were ministers and high-ranking professionals. And yet, the hours sitting in the meetings were still long, decisions were made, documents were signed, parallel bilateral meetings were held, a

\(^{13}\) Helder Da Costa (2012). ‘g7+ and the New Deal: Country-Led and Country-Owned Initiatives: A Perspective from Timor-Leste’. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 7(2), p. 101.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
couple of donor representatives said a few words; that is, everything else seems to me to have been the same as in other aid conferences, in terms of the formality of the setting. The difference was that, because people are comfortable with each other (something we could see in the movements on the dance floor), there is perhaps more warmth in the meeting as well, and vice-versa. Sure, Helder, Habib, and the rest of the Secretariat looked stressed, as is characteristic of organisers and hosts, but the togetherness was clearly cherished.

Here we might thank Himadeep Muppidi for remembering Chinua Achebe’s beautiful words: ‘A man who calls his kinsmen to feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so’.\(^\text{15}\) In what kind of world would that ‘good’ not account for much?

Helder talks about his village in Timor-Leste, Loirubi, Venilale, as something that always provides him with inner peace:

I go there every time I’m in Timor. I cross the river, I look at the mountains and that gives me inner peace. We always [make] a fire there, bake something together. Once, after one of the g7+ meetings in Dili, I brought the representatives of CAR, Somalia, South Sudan, Solomon Islands and DRC to visit the village. I also brought Habib before. They are always impressed. I learned that from my parents, to value my surroundings. They also taught me simplicity, passion, wisdom. I learned from the way they helped people. I think if I didn’t have that kind of experience, I would have fallen in[to] many traps when I went to study abroad in Indonesia, New Zealand and Australia. People take their surroundings for granted.

Certain practices have the power to recharge our energy and keep us focused on our values; being together is one of them, in many ways and in many cases. By coming together with others, a group can create their own surroundings. Contemplation, togetherness, and a certain disposition seem to do wonders to one’s passion.

\(^{15}\) Achebe Chinua, ([1959] 1994). ‘Things Fall Apart’, as cited in Muppidi, Himadeep (2016). ‘The Elements of Bandung’, in Phạm & Shilliam (eds). *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 32.
The time spent in these meetings need not only be functional; there is no reason why joy should not feature in them too.\(^{16}\) I believe that it does not often make much of an appearance because joy simply does not grow out of thin air: commonalities, motivations, cultural codes, expectations, values—affinities, in general, need to exist. And here I speak of joy because I believe joy and trust can be crucial elements of solidarity. They can also feed passion and generate momentum. In turn, only with passion for something can people insist on trying to create alternative ways of thinking (even if limited) when reality pushes back. But passion needs to be nurtured.

**Family Ties**

Because of the many turns the history of Afghanistan took, there have been many waves of displacement. In between 1980 and 1990; around 6.2 million people left for Pakistan and Iran. ‘Having arrived in their areas of resettlement, the majority settled in kin-related groups, either in clusters of nuclear families living in separate housing, or in extended family households’.

(Hatch Dupree, Nancy (2004). ‘The Family During Crisis in Afghanistan’. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35(2), Turbulent Times and Family Life in the Contemporary Middle East, 311–31.)

Solidarity and the joy of being together are also, of course, profoundly cultural and closely related to how families and communities are set up. Modes of being together tend to be absorbed in childhood. Habib speaks of the joint family system with which he is accustomed: ‘Everyone provides for everyone. There are 35 people who can rely on me and on whom I can rely to take care of my family. It’s like an extension of a social security system. It’s tradition’. One can imagine the mark this leaves on one’s attitude towards others and one’s commitment to collective projects. ‘The moment I stop believing in the nobility of the work I do, I will stop working. We invest so much energy, we don’t even feel the time. I’m ambitious... People tease me because I daydream about the g7+ helping [to solve] conflict in member countries. [I don’t mean to be] overconfident but I feel I can contribute where I am. But believing, working with passion... is not fun, not easy anywhere, because you put your heart in it’.\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Interview with Habib Mayar, 23 March 2020.
The way Habib explains how difficult it can be to work with passion is by telling one of his favourite stories: ‘Once I was going back to Dili from Afghanistan and the security lady who was checking my suitcase saw the bag with the g7+ pins. She asked what they were. I explained I worked for peace. She asked, “Where is peace here?” There had been an attack in Kabul with 11 or 12 civilians killed’, he explains; clearly this was an episode that marked him. ‘Such encounters linger on in my mind every time I am at work or in a meeting talking about peace and development’, he says and continues: ‘I might be naïve about the politics of peace and my colleagues say I take my work too seriously. But we all know how serious the need for peace is for those people who witness sufferings by war and conflict. I sacrificed a lot for the work we do. I know my belief is shared by many others in the g7+’.18

His fellow citizen, Naheed, also speaks a lot about what she learned from her family. She recounts how her mother used to teach her about solidarity: ‘My mom always says, “When you do things for yourself it’s very limiting; do [them] for others and your returns will be bigger”’. We saw how steep her learning curve was when coming back to Afghanistan; the passion and commitment that was infused in her by family and tradition means that she feels compelled to work and do good for her country: ‘I lost a lot of my youth. I was very much an adult at 25. Today I take life more easily than at that time. You become very serious when you are handling serious things like all that work. People in that generation in other countries were not like that, so when I was abroad studying, sometimes I felt like I didn’t belong so much’.19

Yes, it can be lonely to work with passion. That is why one needs solidarity; it is not only that the work itself is tough and that any efforts made will necessarily be collective, but that believing in the work is also difficult. Being together, then, is a way of suffusing work with joy so that one is able to keep moving forward. Nevertheless, being together will not do anything for anyone unless there is enough willingness and trust for people to feel comfortable, and a project cannot create this willingness and trust out of nowhere—it must be practised in everyday life and work, and it is connected to shared values and common backgrounds. That is why these qualities should be harnessed as the asset they can be.

---

18 Ibid.
19 Interview with Naheed Sarabi, 03 March 2020.
Living with Frustration but Leaving No-One Behind: Monitoring the SDGs

In the concept note for the event organized at the UN in 2012 (which saw Helder, Habib and Siafa practicing their skills as ‘accidental diplomats’), the g7+ warned: ‘Despite recognising the vital importance of the development priorities of the MDGs, not one g7+ country anticipates reaching any of the MDGs by 2015. The g7+ proposes that in order to reach the goals articulated in the Millennium Declaration, first there must be a firm focus on the foundational framework of peacebuilding and statebuilding’.\textsuperscript{20} This had been on the table for the g7+ member countries since the beginning of conversations back in 2008. It struck their representatives that the goals being projected, although important, didn’t take into account the reality of conflict in those countries and, therefore, were quite blind to the obstacles they faced.\textsuperscript{21} ‘These goals were not priorities that fitted the situation of many countries affected by conflict, and yet we have been measured against these standards and we were so often shown to be failing. There was no strong representation from countries in a fragile situation in the negotiation of the MDGs framework to ensure the priorities were not using a one-size-fits-all approach’.\textsuperscript{22}

It seemed obvious and, still, was yet to be spelled out: ‘[Donors] said, “Ok, the children are not being educated. The children are stunted. The infant mortality is high, etc.” We said, “How can the children be educated if we have instability? There is no security, so which parent is going to allow the children to go to school? Which farmer is going to grow vegetables?”’.\textsuperscript{23} Retrospectively, again, it seems obvious, but as

\textsuperscript{20} g7+ (2012). *High-Level Side Event: The New Deal: g7+ Perspectives and Experiences - Concept Note.*
\textsuperscript{21} See 2019 Independent Review of the g7+ for a discussion on the inclusion of SDG 16.
\textsuperscript{22} g7+ (2016). *Strength in fragility: “We are writing our own history”– The emergence of the g7+ group from our own perspective*, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{23} Min. Pires, as cited in Wyeth, Vanessa, de Carvalho, Gustavo, Woldeselassie, Zerihun A., Mechoulan, Delphine, Boutellis, Arthur, Whineray, David, Moreira de Silva, Jorge, Rosand, Eric & Mahmoud, Youssef (2012). ‘Interview with Emilia Pires, Chair of the g7+ Group of Fragile States’. *International Peace Institute Global Observatory*. https://theglobalobservatory.org/2012/04/interview-with-emilia-pires-minister-of-finance-for-timor-leste-and-chair-of-the-g7-group-of-fragile-states/.
we saw in the earlier stories, speaking about peace was a complicated matter in the New York bubble. So g7+ leaders explained many, many times: ‘We could not achieve the MDGs unless we first achieved peace in our own countries’.24

As we saw in the New York debacle around the inclusion of SDG 16—the goal for peace—g7+’s demands were meant to achieve a change in narrative by bringing forth g7+ countries’ priorities. This would attend to the overall ambition of changing donor behaviour and effectively creating the means for change on the ground in conflict-affected countries.

The inclusion of SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions has been reinforced by the 2030 Agenda’s principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to be integrated and indivisible, which means, for instance, that peace and development cannot be dissociated, and that if some countries in the world are afflicted by conflict and extreme poverty, their plights are global plights. Either the Agenda advances everywhere or the failures are global, because a crucial part of the agenda presupposes cooperation and more equality, including in international dialogues. Let’s bear in mind, for example, the specific targets ‘broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance’ (SDG 16.8)25 and ‘[r]espect each country’s policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development’ (SDG 17.15)26 (See Annex V). These would have the potential to address the g7+’s demands for changes in donor behaviour that date back to the first meetings of IDPS.

Nonetheless, as should perhaps be expected, many will say this is the issue people in the g7+ find more disappointing: ‘Sometimes, we feel frustrated; changing donors’ behaviour is something that we feel we haven’t achieved much’, says Habib. Similarly, Mukululuki says the biggest challenge for the g7+ has been to get donors to respect TRUST,
Leaving No-One Behind (LNOB)

‘By emphasizing that the SDGs are “integrated and indivisible”, the 2030 Agenda discourages a “pick-and-choose” attitude: just as there can be no peace without development and vice-versa, there is no top performance that should be able to ignore poor outcomes in gender equality or access to clean water, for instance. A discussion paper by UNDP suggests five criteria to help identify who is or can be left behind: a) discrimination; b) geography; c) governance; d) socio-economic status; and e) shocks and fragility’.

The dilemma for the g7+ is ‘that of choosing to present themselves as experts in fragility and helping the world in this key aspect of the LNOB agenda, or to precisely advocate against possible stereotypes or stigmas and point out the hypocrisies of a world full of fragility everywhere.’

(Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2019). Op. cit., pp. 81–81.)

one of the New Deal’s pillars, which involves transparency of aid, risk sharing, use and strengthening of country systems, a strengthening of capacity, and timely, predictable aid. ‘Development partners remain largely off-track in delivering on the TRUST principles. While there are some islands of good practice, there have not yet been tremendous changes in donor behaviour. But we must remember this is a long-term endeavour. We are talking about changing narratives and mind-sets that have been in place within the development industry for decades. Changing these will require time, and it will also require greater political commitment on the part of donors’.

Let us see an example of what the expectations driven by these principles would look like. In a study produced by the g7+ foundation comparing experiences of public finance management (PFM) between Timor-Leste and Afghanistan in order to promote peer learning, the conclusion is a pledge for a change in donor behaviour, one that is much in line with the principles of TRUST:

This focus [of donors] on minimizing fiduciary risk drives the project-oriented and fragmented approach to development that has been a feature of [aid in] fragile states. Projects focus on “safeguarding” donor funds and “end-of-program outcomes” rather than progress towards national goals like self-reliance and the continuous improvement of the

---

27 g7+, Strength in Fragility, p. 56.
institutions of the state. There is also the misapprehension that there is a trade-off between the two; that, in order to achieve better development outcomes, donors have to increase their fiduciary risk. The evidence does not support this. In fact, the opposite is more common. By increasing focus on development risk, including by using national systems and building self-reliance, donors are actually in a position to ask for higher levels of accountability and to achieve lower fiduciary risk. Leaving aside donor priorities, governments themselves tend to increase the level of transparency and accountability when budgets increase, as was demonstrated in Timor-Leste during the period of expansion following the increase in oil and gas revenues.28

Afghanistan’s experience in managing donors’ interest and commitment, of course, is a long and complex one—and it is now coming to a halt, because of the Taliban’s takeover. Afghan Minister of Economy, Mustafa Mastoor, offered a mixed diagnosis before the takeover: ‘In terms of aid and how we manage it, it has changed significantly, but it’s not perfect, of course. We are aware of how politically-driven aid is, and because of that, in a certain way, Afghanistan has been privileged, receiving more support than other countries. But for a while the volume of aid has been less relevant than how aid is practiced. In that sense, we must say in-budget support is higher than for other countries, but aid hasn’t changed much’.29 The lack of more substantial changes is intimately related to the use of conditionalities that have a history of doing precisely the opposite of what the g7+ stands for: ‘We do have a lot of funding, but also a lot of conditionalities. We should highlight this as a group. Sometimes, in Afghanistan, it’s like a Christmas tree of conditionalities that we have to implement’, says Naheed.30

Much of these difficulties boil down to the need to strengthen institutions and build capacity, which the g7+ sees as both a means and an end in itself. The group argues that when aid sidesteps a country’s systems, it does not just miss an opportunity of contributing to those ends, but it also might weaken them further. When former Minister of Finance from South Sudan, H. E. Kosti Manibe, proclaimed ‘nothing

---

28 g7+ foundation & Institute for State Effectiveness. State building in conflict-affected & fragile states: A comparative study, p. 7.
29 Interview with Muhammad Mustafa Mastoor, 17 June 2019.
30 Interview with Naheed Sarabi, 03 March 2020.
about us without us’, the idea of putting countries’ ownership at the centre of any development cooperation was crucial.\textsuperscript{31}

Addressing these issues requires g7+’s representatives to deal with frustrations about their own challenges at home, which, if clearly painful to address, are nevertheless not ignored. Habib, having pointed out the disappointment at the slow pace of change in donor behaviour, has come forward to publicly suggest solutions to the risk he acknowledges exists in using country systems: ‘The g7+ fully recognises the presence of risk perceived by development partners while channelling aid through the treasury of the beneficiary government. g7+ governments are not turning a blind eye to this fact. Thus, it is helpful to jointly sketch a plan of action that assesses the risk and proposes a mitigating strategy. It is this kind of strategic thinking around the use of country systems that is currently still lacking.’\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Quote in g7+ (2016). \textit{Strength in fragility: “We are writing our own history”–The emergence of the g7+ group from our own perspective.}

\textsuperscript{32} Mayar, Habib Ur Rehman (2014). ‘The Journey Towards Resilience Continues: g7+ Priorities to Confront Ebola, Implement the New Deal and Influence the Post-2015 Agenda’. \textit{Journal of Peacebuilding & Development}, 9(3), p. 124.
Indeed, there has historically been a heated debate over aid efficiency that looks precisely into the kinds of corruption such flows might elicit. On the other hand, more critical voices point to the lack of similar interest, within the field of international cooperation, in fencing off corrupt practices on the part of large multinationals everywhere.

Here, a quick detour may be useful.

It is undeniable that there is an enormous challenge posed to international aid and cooperation by inefficient or corrupt institutions. Concern has been followed by research that has historically highlighted two sets of problems: the need to better understand how aid itself can impact corruption levels and have negative effects over governance; and the need to address the dilemma of how to deal with unstable political situations and controversial leaderships, when many of the resources might never reach those in need. In Afghanistan itself, according to a 2021 report to the United Nations Congress, $143 billion was spent on reconstruction since 2002, of which $93 billion was directed to Afghan police and armed forces, and around $50 billion to government and civil society programs. This is a formidable amount of money that has no equal in any other conflict-affected country. Yet, although some positive results have been achieved, it is an understatement to suggest that a lot more should have been possible.

What criticisms like those posed by the g7+ may achieve is the possibility of complicating these matters further, not dismissing them. Undoubtedly, in order for the citizens in these countries to have better lives, corruption and institutional inefficiency need to be addressed, and the g7+’s discourse aligns with that. Nevertheless, drawing attention to the ambiguities and contradictions of an unequal international system can add value to this discussion without minimising the gravity of those problems. For instance, researchers and advisors for the US government

---

33 For recent data, see Andersen, Jørgen Juel, Johannesen, Niels & Rijkers, Bob (2020). ‘Elite Capture of Foreign Aid Evidence from Offshore Bank Accounts’. CEBI Working Paper 07/20.
34 See Mohran, Theodore H. (2006). How Multinational Investors Evoke Developed Country Laws. Center for Global Development, Working Paper Number 79.
35 Jenkins, Matthew, Kukutschka, Roberto Martínez B. & Zúñiga, Nieves (2020). Anti-Corruption In Fragile Settings: A Review Of The Evidence. Bonn and Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.
36 United States (2021). 2021 Quarterly Report to Congress. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr-section2-funding.pdf, p. 25.
have long put pressure on the country to strengthen its stance on corruption when it comes to aid allocation. In fact, the US 2019 Global Fragility Act, only recently finally further detailed, is supposed to be a response to these demands, a reaction against corruption scandals of the kind that came to the fore with several reviews of the US actions in Afghanistan, which showed how the reconstruction led by American diplomacy, defence and development personnel were doomed to weaken governance and create incentives for corruption: ‘Money, technical assistance, and diplomatic attention do not address, and can even exacerbate, the problems of government illegitimacy, corruption, and collusion with violent groups that make these states unstable’.37 However, while attention has been rightly drawn to the inaction of donor countries in including measures that can counter incentives to corruption provided by their interventions in conflict-affected countries, there are a number of questions that remain unasked. A recent study has shown, for example, that donor fragmentation itself can be an important factor. Especially under high volumes of aid, donor fragmentation can lead to ‘a degradation of ownership, accountability, and responsibility over development outcomes and processes’, which, in turn, can facilitate ‘an ongoing culture of corruption within state institutions, thereby nullifying aid’s otherwise beneficial impact on institutional quality, and the indirect public opinion dividends that ensue (including those related to conflict)’. Another question has been to what extent, in certain contexts, the failures of aid to address, weaken or at least circumvent corruption have not been so much failures, but ‘a policy choice’, considering the interests of private contractors, for instance.38 Putting new facts center stage might not be possible if other actors, like the g7+, do not ask how interventions also heavily depend on how money is disbursed by donors. There is great value in keeping automatic thinking at bay.

37 United States (2021). 2020 United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability; Kleinfield, R. (2021). Picking Global Fragility Act Countries: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/26/picking-global-fragility-act-countries-pub-84610.
38 Landers, Clemence & Aboneaaj, Rakan (2021). Giving up the “Statebuilding” Ghost: Lessons from Afghanistan for Foreign Assistance in Fragile States. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/giving-statebuilding-ghost-lessons-afghanistan-foreign-assistance-fragile-states.
Going back to LNOB and the 2030 Agenda, there is something to be said about the discrepancy between the paces at which different groups are expected to move. While many point to the slow rhythm of donors, after the approval of SDGs the call to monitor the implementation of the goals put a lot of pressure on national statistical systems and planning offices, especially in conflict-affected countries. These were required to move fast, although support was also promised. But we should note that things are complex: it is clear that the g7+ representatives find all this reporting extremely important; however, moving forward with it amid the social, economic, and political challenges that member countries face has proved incredibly difficult.

While the road to achieving the SDGs in g7+ member countries is beset with obstacles, effectively monitoring progress is itself a challenging endeavour. This challenge is all the greater due to the large number of goals (17) and indicators (23[1])\textsuperscript{39} in the 2030 Agenda—larger even than in the MDGs. In addition, there is frequently no available baseline data for many of these indicators in g7+ countries. Indeed, for the so-called “tier 3” SDG indicators, the establishment and testing of the standards/methodology is yet to be finalised at the international level.\textsuperscript{40} In addition to these universal challenges, the g7+ member countries have reported on their own especially significant constraints. These include a lack of funding, insufficient human resources and technical capacity, lack of coordination between government institutions, insufficient IT capability and, for some of these countries, insecurity and the effects of ongoing conflict. These are problems that have long affected the ability of these countries to undertake national censuses and surveys, but which become more apparent in the context of such an extensive set of indicators.\textsuperscript{41}

These are considerable obstacles not only to implementing, but also to monitoring progress in the SDGs in the g7+ countries; for this reason, the group decided to select and prioritise reporting on 20 targets chosen in a 2016 technical meeting (See Annex VI). Goals 12 to 15, which cover consumption and the environment-related goals, are not among them, and any member countries that wish to report on more SDG

\textsuperscript{39} Number adjusted to current list of indicators. See: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/.

\textsuperscript{40} See UN Stats (2020). SDG Indicators: Metadata repository. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/.

\textsuperscript{41} g7+ (2018). SDG Report 2018 (draft), p. 3.
indicators beyond those selected are encouraged to do so. In addition, new indicators were added, including one on internally displaced persons (IDPs).\textsuperscript{42} The first report was drafted in 2018 but not widely circulated, and no other reports were produced. There was mention of creating an online platform for joint reporting and dissemination, but this has not been implemented so far.

This is a case where it seems passion and motivation come from many directions. There are good intentions behind the decision to see these goals monitored and, most importantly, implemented in g7+ countries. However, the reality can be frustrating and the work overwhelming. When we take into account how incredibly complex the review of the global indicators framework for the SDGs has been, the fact that the g7+ member countries struggle with monitoring the implementation of the SDGs comes as no surprise. As of 2020, five years after the approval of the 2030 Agenda, the revision of SDG indicators at the UN was still in progress and 35 indicators out of 231 were still under Tier III—that is, they were indicators for which there are no methodologies for collection and no data; meanwhile 98 were under Tier II, for which there are methodologies but no established routine of data collection.\textsuperscript{43} In March 2021, refinements were proposed, and only as of February 2022, finally, are there no Tier III indicators left: ‘The updated tier classification table contains 136 Tier I indicators, 91 Tier II indicators and 4 indicators that have multiple tiers (different components of the indicator are classified into different tiers’.\textsuperscript{44}

Still, it is estimated around ‘US$5.1 billion for the period until 2030 is needed in extra donor funding’ to finance SDG monitoring data. ‘This equates to some US$340 million per year’.\textsuperscript{45} Although some might say this is only a small percentage of Official Development Assistance (ODA), it is a considerable amount of money, and this expenditure may

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] See Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2019). Op. cit.
\item[43] See: United Nations (2020). Compilation of 2020 Comprehensive Review Proposals Received. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/2020\%20Comprehensive\%20Review\%20Proposals_web.pdf.
\item[44] UN Stats (2022). Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/Tier\%20Classification\%20of\%20SDG\%20Indicators_4\%20Feb\%202022_web.pdf.
\item[45] See: Jütting, Johannes & Badiee, Shaida (2016). Financing SDG data needs: What does it cost? Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data. http://www.data4sdgs.org/news/financing-sdg-data-needs-what-does-it-cost.
\end{footnotes}
not be such a high priority now, especially after the crisis that COVID-19 is causing around the globe.

This is how Habib reacts to the estimate of how much will be needed to monitor the SDGs:

While recognizing the need of expertise, technical know-how and international institutions with experts in statistics, it is more important to empower the countries themselves and their national statistical offices and planning departments to be able to undertake the task of monitoring the SDGs. This would have a dual impact: one, it would help building national capacity in conflict-affected countries in general and further strengthen accountability; and two, it would allow for more in-country dialogues on progress across SDGs. While I am not sure what would be included if we talk about 340 million dollar/year to assist in monitoring, I am sure that at least the conflict-affected countries will need a tiny portion of that money to build their national system and mechanisms for statistics. Remember we have countries in g7+ where census is based on mere estimates instead of head counts and where the last physical census was conducted a few decades ago. Moreover, the g7+ practice of joint monitoring the SDGs was and still is expected to show by example that countries can and need to be given the ownership to lead the exercise; and to identify the capacity gap in national statistics.

He concludes by pointing at how the g7+ plans to monitor its priority indicators in terms of the UN 2030 Agenda (see Annex VI). His point, it seems to me, is that all the money in the world can still leave much undone. The issue, as many have said before, is how this money is spent.46

Putting Solidarity into Practice: Conflict Mediation in the Central African Republic

It is not straightforward to be in solidarity with one another and to work together if one is addressing complex issues, such development and conflict. Even if one wants to do so, the difficult question is usually ‘how?’.

In 2014, the Central African Republic (CAR) was going through conflict between diverse armed groups. Bienvenu Hervé Kovoungbo had been the g7+ focal point for CAR since 2011. He speaks with much pride about this work and his country membership:

---
46 See, for instance, Ramalingam (2013).
I started working in the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Cooperation and, soon after, I supported the monitoring of the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Principles for Engagement with Fragile States and Situations, so my supervisors decided to allocate me to deal with all issues related with fragility. I had participated of the IDPS and g7+ meetings in Kinshasa and later, in Monrovia. The first g7+ focal point was very supportive and contributed to my promotion; I am very grateful. Today, I am Director of International Cooperation and I am also the focal point and the chief of the Secretariat of National Coordination that monitors the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As such, I am in charge of the technical coordination of a team formed by 150 people and of interacting with many other institutions. I am also the focal point for the Global Partnership Cooperation on Effective Development, for South-South and Triangular Cooperation and the Istanbul Declaration and Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries.\(^\text{47}\)

Honestly, this list is impressive. I reproduce it in full because it is important to understand how Bienvenu came to be where he is and why he credits the g7+ with so much of the work he accomplished.

At the end of 2013, CAR was going through severe conflict. French troops intervened in December 2013, followed two months later by a European Union military operation. In the meantime, in October 2013, Bienvenu attended a g7+ meeting in Dili. After listening to the motivational words of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, he asked for his support for a possible reconciliation process in CAR: ‘I was so impressed with how Timor-Leste had contributed with Guinea-Bissau that I decided to tell him how things were in my country. When I asked whether he would [agree] to come and talk to the armed groups, his response was “yes”. I went back to my country and convinced the council of ministers to send a formal invitation to the government of Timor-Leste’, Bienvenu recalls with obvious pride.\(^\text{48}\)

The situation was very difficult in 2014. In June, Bienvenu attended the IDPS meeting in Freetown that was organised by Abie; however, when the meeting finished, he could not immediately go back home and was held up in Cameroon while his family fled their home due to the violence erupting in Bangui.

\(^{47}\) Interview with Bienvenu Hervé Kovoungbo, 24 April 2020.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
Later, in September 2014, the UN took over and expanded the then-existing peacekeeping mission in CAR.

The same year, PM Xanana Gusmão visited CAR, following the invitation arranged by Bienvenu.

I elaborated the terms of reference and contacted the leaders of the armed groups. I had authorisation to do so, but it was at my own risk, because the security situation was such that it was very risky to contact the armed groups. No one knew I was doing that, not my wife, not my children. It was too risky. I had hope, I had the power over the destiny of my country. My wife wouldn’t accept that. When Xanana Gusmão arrived, I went alone to talk to him about meeting with the groups. They couldn’t come to him because they couldn’t come to the centre or they would risk getting arrested. He came to them, but when they saw he was white, they said they wouldn’t speak to him, because “the white people are the ones behind the coup, the manipulation, the guns”, but then Xanana said he was not white, he was Timorese, so he was “like them”, he said. He mentioned he had gone through difficult situations too. I was so relieved. I took risks, because all phones can be tapped and anyone who contacts the armed groups can be prosecuted. But I wanted to do that for peace in my country. The government knew I was doing so, but of course it was the ministers who knew, not all judges, not all the policemen... And because I was talking to them, people could think I was their friend.

He still sounds anxious about this. Much academic literature on postcolonial relations stresses the importance of rethinking difference in light of common cultural and historical experiences of exploitation: ‘the concept of Black was mobilized as part of a set of constitutive principles and ideas to promote collective action’, the idea being to ‘generate solidarity’ by resorting to ‘Black as a political colour’.

Because of that conversation, we convinced the leaders of the armed groups to go to the Reconciliation Forum, later in 2015. Before the Bangui Forum, the government held a dialogue in Brazzaville, Congo. We transported the leaders of the armed groups there. But some groups which were held up in CAR said they wouldn’t support the process and

49 Ibid.
50 Brah, Avtar (2006). ‘Diferença, diversidade, diferenciação’. Cadernos pagu, 26, 329–76, pp. 334, 336. My translation. Original publication: ‘Difference, Diversity, Differentiation’, in Brah, Avtar (1996). Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities. London and New York: Routledge, ch. 5, pp. 95–127.
wouldn’t go to the Forum. The leaders had accepted but some groups wouldn’t go, so we needed to talk to them. I coordinated for Xanana to go talk to them. He did so as a former war time leader, and he convinced them; they finally [agreed] to go to the Forum. I will never forget that. The president of the Forum invited him then to stay a few days more in CAR and to participate in a parliamentary session, where he had permission to [make] a speech. Everyone heard it everywhere. This was Xanana’s first visit, and he managed to get the leaders of armed groups to agree to attend the Reconciliation Forum, to be held in May 2015.

Bienvenu remembers all the details without any difficulty.51

The Bangui National Forum opened on 4 May 2015. The overall objective of the forum was to issue a set of recommendations on peace and security, justice and reconciliation, and socio-economic development. The forum was attended by 600 to 700 participants from around CAR, including high-level representatives of the transitional government, which was under H. E. President Catherine Samba-Panza, besides national political parties, non-state armed groups (Séléka and Anti-Balaka), the private sector, civil society, traditional chiefs, and religious groups.52

The g7+ was represented by its Secretariat in response to the invitation of the President of the Interim Government of CAR to the g7+’s Eminent Person, Xanana Gusmão. During the closing ceremony of the Bangui Forum, the g7+ Secretariat read the speech prepared by him. The message is said to have been warmly received and to have ‘generated a lot of traction with the audience’: ‘They all chanted our motto “Goodbye Conflict, Welcome Development” at the end of the speech’.53

Helder also wrote at the time: ‘On the 11th of May, the g7+ Secretariat was honored to be part of the closing ceremony of the Bangui National Forum for National Reconciliation in [the] Central African Republic. The event served as a heartening reminder of the critical importance of engagement and dialogue for promoting peace and development. We were struck by the passion expressed by participants from all parties’.54

51 Ibid.
52 Excerpt from g7+ Newsletter, March–May 2015, p. 1.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 4.
Conflict in CAR

The Central African Republic (CAR) has had two different experiences with United Nations peacekeeping forces. From 25 September 2007 till 31 December 2010, the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) was established in eastern Chad and north-eastern CAR to support the efforts concerning the 230,000 refugees from Darfur, Sudan. It had up to 5,200 military personnel and 300 police officers on the ground.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) started in 10 April 2014 to protect CAR civilians after the Séléka militia rebellion in 2013 and subsequent formation of the Anti-Balaka militia who confronted them. The conflict resulted in 320,000 refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries and more than 600,000 people internally displaced.

MINUSCA transformed a 6,000 African Union-led peacekeeping force into the UN force that nowadays reaches 13,252 total personnel, mostly composed of African troops. MINUSCA was granted unprecedented capabilities of law enforcement, temporarily taking over the legal system. Nonetheless, the mission faces challenges, with different kinds of abuse still happening, and accusations of sexual violence that led to an entire battalion being sent back home.

(See https://egiuliani.wordpress.com/2014/02/28/central-african-republic/; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13150044; https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusca; GILDER, Alexander (2020). Human Security and the Stabilization Mandate of MINUSCA. International Peacekeeping, [S.L.], p. 1–32).

Unfortunately, today, there is again instability in CAR, but as the path to peace is long and full of obstacles, it is important to acknowledge, understand, and reproduce moments when peace had a chance. Again, it is beyond our scope to dive into the details of these events; our focus is on what they generated among the g7+. For those involved, ‘[t]he Bangui Forum was a major milestone in CAR’s transition towards peace and stability. The forum was widely considered a success’. Indeed,

---

55 See Council on Foreign Relations (2022). Violence in the Central African Republic. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic.
56 Excerpt from g7+ Newsletter, March–May 2015, p. 2.
Bienvenu speaks of it as a major milestone in the country’s history and in his own, and as a point when he felt the work of the g7+ could be extremely important. He would request the group’s aid one more time.

Later, in April 2016, there was a meeting with people in Washington D.C., where Xanana met my minister. He wanted to come and support the reconciliation process; he asked my minister what the g7+ could contribute with, if they had a priority at this moment. My government mentioned the displaced people in our country. I remember when I saw the camp. I had been in a mission for two weeks. When I came back and saw from the plane the thousands of people displaced in a camp at the airport... Everyone on the plane was crying, I was crying. I said to myself “to cry is one thing but I promise in my heart to do everything I can”. I played my role; I asked my minister if Xanana could come. The g7+ came to visit the camp in Bangui. It was horrible, families with children, women, all in inhuman conditions...

He tells this story in obvious pain.

There were 28,000 internally displaced people living in the camp. Some had been there for three years since the violence erupted in 2013. The conditions were completely unsanitary; the situation was precarious. French and UN troops kept the area safe (although there are also accusations of abuse) but the camp was still at the airport, so it was risky in many ways, and basic provisions were constantly needed but not always coming through. People depended heavily on humanitarian assistance, yet ‘Mpoko [airport] and indeed the Central African Republic never saw a mobilisation of international aid at levels similar to other displaced people or refugee camps in the world’. CAR has always been an aid orphan.

There was some dispute internationally as to the timing of the camp’s closure. Some organisations said that it was completely unjustified as families had not received enough support to go back to houses that had been destroyed. The government, in turn, spoke of restoring dignity. And there might have been a strategic measure of public pressure

---

57 See MSF (2017). *Five reasons to care about the closure of Mpoko camp*. https://www.msf.org/central-african-republic-five-reasons-care-about-closure-mpoko-camp.

58 See Baddorf, Zack (2016). *CAR Begins Closing Displaced Persons Camp in Bangui*. https://www.voanews.com/africa/car-begins-closing-displaced-persons-camp-bangui.

59 See MSF (2017). *Five reasons to care about the closure of Mpoko camp*. https://www.msf.org/central-african-republic-five-reasons-care-about-closure-mpoko-camp.
placed on international organisations, as then they would have been more disposed to help provide basic infrastructure for those returning home. Opinions and positions vary:

‘The humanitarian organisations didn’t want the camps to close down. The reason, for me, was that it was good for trade, finance, their projects, to take pictures... When the g7+ came, they went in the spirit of solidarity and visited the tents. Xanana went in the camp, entered the tents! He cried. Who, what other authorities do that? Then they decided to help and make a donation’.60 Timor-Leste donated $2 million to help close the camp.61 ‘The fund was channelled directly to CAR’s Finance Ministry, using its country system. The Government equally contributed 250 million (CFA francs) to the process’, says Bienvenu in a short article written for the g7+ December 2017 Newsletter.62

Helche was part of the g7+ team that visited the camp at the Mpoko Airport.

There were mothers with their babies, they were in such poor conditions. It had rained the night before, so there was a lot of red mud everywhere... We heard so many touching stories from the families at the refugee camp. Some told us that the young girls had no sanitary pads, and I could tell they felt trapped, insecure there. We heard a lot of personal stories. We went from there straight to an all-night meeting. I remember my shoes were covered with that red mud, but we wanted to discuss what we had seen right away. We were thinking “How can we help?”. We talked for hours, just to write the report we produced for the UN. We had faced a similar situation back in 1999 in Timor, with the Indonesian military. I knew it was dirty, uncomfortable. As soon as we came back to Dili, the Government of Timor-Leste made the pledge to help people return to their homes. They closed the camp 3 to 4 months after that. I know our support was not that big, but we made it effective.63

Bienvenu’s words confirm that feeling: ‘The place was closed with that help in a consensual manner between the people and the government. People would agree, on a voluntary basis, after receiving some money

---

60 Interview with Bienvenu Hervé Kovoungbo, 24 April 2020.
61 g7+ (n.d.). 7 things to know about Fragile-to-Fragile (F2F) Cooperation, p. 3.
62 g7+ (2017). Newsletter.
63 Interview with Helche Silvester, 05 March 2020.
to help them return home or find a new home. I will never forget what the g7+ did." 64

‘Xanana met everyone in the country. He still managed to meet with all leaders of armed groups to congratulate them on the reconciliation. I am very close [to him] still and he has high esteem for me. He really influenced me so much. They call me Xanana Gusmão here!’, Bienvenu says laughing.

CAR is still facing many obstacles to peace and development, but the value of solidarity has kept people like Bienvenu confident enough that he works to keep cooperation with others going. ‘We live with frustration in our DNA. But we need to be aware and make sure this doesn’t control our behaviour. That’s my philosophy. Without cooperation, nothing would happen. It’s always a matter of improving that cooperation’. 65

And he also has reasons to distrust cooperation.

At this point in the conversation, he excuses himself and starts telling another story. First, he apologises twice for telling me this, but he says he thinks I will understand, being a woman. ‘It was 13 January 2016. There was a cease-fire going on in Bangui. I was at home with my wife, and at 1am she went into labour. There was no transport, because of the curfew. We walked on foot until we found MINUSCA troops. I explained I was a civil servant. I said, “You are here to protect civilians, please help my wife, she is in labour”. They said that to take my wife [in] their car, my wife who was about to die in pain, they would need to call their bosses in New York and get authorisation. There you have, cooperation!', he says with loud outrage. ‘I asked my wife, and we decided to go to a small clinic, where they gave her some medicine and someone managed to get a car—I thanked him—to take her to the hospital. In 30 minutes, she gave birth. If she had to walk that much, she would have had to give birth on the road and she might have died! We need to humanize that cooperation. We have a form of cooperation that sticks to procedures that ignore[s] the dignity of human life, that [doesn’t] respect that dignity of life’, he concludes. 66

We must remember that the person telling me that story and saying those powerful words is the focal point in CAR for every major

64 Interview with Bienvenu Hervé Kovoungbo, 24 April 2020.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
cooperation agreement and partnership there is right now in the country. He does believe in international solidarity and cooperation, but the difference might be that he is truly passionate about it. He cannot conceive of solidarity and cooperation not being synonymous with each other. He does not see cooperation as a technical, straight-jacketed version of solidarity, or at least he does not believe it should be.

A major contribution the g7+ could make might be to find ways for solidarity and cooperation to exist together, and for the latter to be more humanized.

Challenges to Passion and Solidarity: Seeking Flexibility in the Face of an Obsession with Templates

One of the challenges that the g7+ was created to face is the bureaucratic, managerialist mentality that is pervasive in the development field, and that makes donor behaviour so difficult to change. Most people in the group identify this as their greatest frustration; after all, ‘measurability should not be confused with development significance’ and ‘development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are
the least measurable’. It is not only a matter of changing the narrative around fragility, but of making this change work in order to affect other changes on the ground as well. The advocacy practised by the g7+ aims to address these issues by promoting different means of engagement, diverse frameworks, and principles. However, these will always be of limited success in a realm where people consume new frameworks like they change clothes.

Around the middle of 2018, Habib wrote in disappointment:

[A]fter the launch of the New Deal, there was a lot of energy around it... But as time [has] passed by, we see progress only on the technical aspect of the New Deal as is found by its first Monitoring Report in 2014 (IDPS, 2014). In other words, it seems to be falling out of fashion, whereas it has a pioneering role in the international system and policies related to conflict and fragility. I am afraid that this might become a global norm of endorsing a new framework and agreeing on principles without attempting to realize the potential of what we have committed to. Thus, the IDPS is in need of consolidating its potential and [to] be utilized for political dialogue, rather than purely technical discussion among the g7+, donors, and civil society.

In a way, it is almost as if ‘experts’ consider it ‘unprofessional’ to stick to one’s plan, to be passionate about it and want to see it through to its end. Of course, seeing something through cannot mean an absence of adaptation and flexibility; frameworks are always found lacking when faced with reality. But instead of creating things anew, there is value in commitment, especially when it is clear that technical solutions are limited, often wasteful (‘experts’ cost high fees, as seen in the first budget presented to Guinea-Bissau for their elections), and can only go so far without passion and solidarity. In fact, it is passion that often lays the ground for flexibility, precisely because it keeps things human—and flexibility is key in conflict-affected countries and in complex situations in general.

The g7+ faces other challenges as well; and some of the most considerable challenges are internal. The passion of those individuals

67 Natsios, Andrew (2010). *The Clash of the Counter-bureaucracy and Development*. Center for Global Development, p. 3.

68 Mayar, Habib Ur Rehman (2018). ‘Sustaining peace and shared prosperity: The question of fragile states’. *Global Social Policy*, pp. 222–27.

69 See also: Peake, Gordon (2013). *Beloved Land: Stories, struggles, and secrets from Timor-Leste*. London: Scribe Publications.
portrayed in these stories, their solidarity, and joy in being together, have so far been generated by only a few people. This problem is well acknowledged by the group; most of the focal points, apart from Antonio, Abie, and Bienvenu, change frequently. We have seen with the three of them and a few others what the amazing gains might be of having people stick around for a longer period of time, but, of course, this is a huge challenge when governments change often. An additional challenge is the underlying financial asymmetry: among member countries, Timor-Leste pays most of the bills related to the g7+, although contributions from other member countries were approved in 2019 and are in the process of being ratified by governments. And usually only a few of the member countries are particularly active internationally, voicing the g7+’s various agendas. Finally, the old challenge of involving Finance Ministers only crops up every now and then; whenever one needs active professional diplomatic engagement, for instance, or larger buy-ins nationally for implementing g7+ mechanisms, such as Fragility Assessments, and the monitoring of priority SDGs. The g7+ has been seeking to expand its range of involvement to other ministries, to chiefs of government, and parliaments.70 Two initiatives, one on Access to Justice, which might bring the g7+ to the closer attention of Ministers of Justice, and one on the potential creation of a g7+ Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, can be of great benefit in that sense.71

Last, but not least, passion cannot compensate for preparedness, and personal relationships have their limits. Institutionally, although the close ties of solidarity played an undoubtedly crucial part in what the g7+ has achieved, they are vulnerable to changes in government and the exhaustion of the people who are engaged in the organisation. Moreover, people often cannot implement changes in their ministries and governments by themselves, no matter how invested they are, unless other people are strategically aware and engaged.

That said, the fact that joy, passion and solidarity cannot do everything all by themselves does not mean they are ineffective. As these stories show, there is much to be harnessed there and when facing considerable obstacles, ranging from war to intense frustration, then joy, passion, and solidarity are often the only remedies that can keep people moving forward. They

70 See Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2019). Op. cit.
71 g7+ March 2020 Newsletter.
are assets in that sense—not secondary, not dispensable, and not exotic additions.

How to Work with Passion: On the Value of Doing Things Together

1. Togetherness needs to be seen as a value and a practice.
2. Learn to live with frustration but leave no one behind.
3. Put solidarity in practice (truly).
It was just right after independence and we had so much to reconstruct in Timor...

I asked the Finance Minister and others to help define our priorities

We have urgent matters in all fronts. Maybe the most important would be to start with...

Mr. President...?

Swings?

That’s what peace is like.

That park over there. We need to reconstruct it and put some swings there for the kids.

I’m sorry, sir, but the country is devastated. I think we have more urgent matters...

If we want to reconstruct this country, what is urgent is that people learn to lead a normal life, that the kids know what’s like to play with swings.
On the day it was open, there were kids queuing until midnight for a chance to have a go at the swings.

They are so happy...

And that’s what we need if we are to have a chance at peace with the young generation.