



# IMPLEMENTING THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT

## From Policy to Strategy

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## What is the Global Fragility Act?

Passed with strong bipartisan support in December 2019, the Global Fragility Act aims to transform U.S. foreign policy and assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states. The Global Fragility Act (GFA) responds to calls from humanitarian organizations, like Mercy Corps, for increased investment in preventing global violence. A spike in the number of protracted conflicts is creating the largest global displacement crisis since the Second World War. The law also enacts the 9/11 Commission's recommendation that the U.S. government focus on preventing, rather than simply reacting to, violent conflict and extremism. The commission's successor, the Task Force on Preventing Violent Extremism in Fragile States, found that effective prevention requires a fundamental alteration in *how* the U.S. government engages with fragile and conflict-affected states and societies. Prevention requires that the U.S. government focus on bottom-up, in addition to top-down, solutions that aim to



improve the relationship between state and society. The Global Fragility Act – and the Global Fragility Strategy that it tasks the Executive Branch with producing by September 2020 – aims to translate these task force recommendations into concrete changes to the diplomatic and programmatic approaches of U.S. foreign policy infrastructure. **The Global Fragility Strategy represents an unprecedented opportunity to change how the U.S. government operates in fragile and conflict-affected states.** Crucially, implementing the Global Fragility Act should be seen as a direct effort to save lives.

## Leveraging Past Lessons for a New Approach

The prescriptions contained in the Global Fragility Act reflect lessons learned from three decades of [engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states](#). These lessons, which generated the impetus for the Global Fragility Act, are not new. What is new is the fact that **the Global Fragility Act makes it possible to put these lessons into practice across U.S. government agencies and departments.** The GFA offers both an unprecedented opportunity and, to some degree, an unprecedented challenge to those in the field – the diplomats and development officers, as well as their implementing partners. Though the work is difficult, the stakes are high: Preventing violent conflict and extremism matters for U.S. national security interests and for the people, communities, and countries suffering from persistent violent conflict.

In this policy brief, we synthesize existing [research](#) to outline detailed recommendations for the implementation of the Global Fragility Act, focusing on the programmatic elements of conflict prevention. Congress will expect that the Global Fragility Strategy identifies both the diplomatic and programmatic elements of the strategy. This brief focuses on identifying what works and what does not work in building international peace, preventing conflict, and preventing violent extremism programming.

The Global Fragility Strategy need not re-create the wheel when it comes to improving the effectiveness of the U.S. government's preventive efforts in fragile and conflict-affected states. There is ample evidence not just on *what* preventive programs to implement but also on [how to engage more effectively](#) with fragile and conflict-affected states. Whereas specific activities and interventions change from context to context, how U.S. agencies and departments design relevant programs, how they identify partners and local accountability mechanisms, and how they learn from their successes and failures should not. This is the most important lesson from research on intervention in fragile and conflict-affected states. **The effectiveness of programming in fragile and conflict-affected states depends much more on how the program engages with the conflict-affected context than on the exact programmatic details of what the program does.**

## Guided by Six Lessons

The Global Fragility Act reflects **six lessons about foreign assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states identified by academics, practitioners, and policymakers:**

- 1) Foreign aid must be grounded in political awareness of the conflict dynamics and technical capacity to implement and monitor interventions in a conflict-sensitive way.
- 2) The relevance of the program to the particular country context may be the most important determinant of its success.

- 3) Effective prevention is not possible without the buy-in, support, and capacity of a diverse group of governmental, non-governmental, and community actors representing different perspectives and constituencies in fragile and conflict-affected countries.
- 4) The fragmented and top-down nature of foreign assistance is part of the problem facing the U.S. government's preventive efforts.
- 5) To be more effective, aid to fragile and conflict-affected states should be based on a long-term strategy even as it responds to daily dynamics and complex political reality.
- 6) Programming in fragile and conflict-affected states needs to be relevant to the changing context and preferences of the conflict-affected population, which requires a deep investment in knowledge generation, learning, and adaptation.

The challenge facing the U.S. government agencies and departments charged with developing and implementing the Global Fragility Strategy is to translate these hard-won lessons into real change in the policies and practices that guide U.S. foreign assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states. In the following sections, we synthesize research findings about how to accomplish this goal.



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## The “What” and “How” of Foreign Assistance in the Global Fragility Act

### THE WHAT

The Global Fragility Act identifies the main cross-cutting themes and types of interventions that make up conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and prevention of violent extremism programming in these contexts. It gets these types of interventions and cross-cutting issues right, reflecting both the [research base](#) and other [policy documents](#) and [reports](#) that have come before.

The core theory behind the Global Fragility Act's programmatic interventions is that **if the marginalization of certain groups from access to the state and its resources is part of the problem, then [inclusion](#) is part of the solution.** Inclusion refers to which political, social, ethnic, gender, age, and/or religious groups benefit from aid. To create inclusive institutions, the Global Fragility Act argues that U.S. government agencies and departments should implement interventions that foster rule of law, representative political institutions, security sector institutions that protect human rights, and economic development for all, in addition to supporting shorter-term reconciliation and dialogue efforts (Section 504(a)(4)). With some variation, the GFA's proposed projects and programs mirror those promoted by the World Bank, United Nations, U.S. Agency for International Development, UK Department for International Development, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, European Union, African Union, international non-governmental organizations such as Mercy Corps, and numerous other foreign aid donors. The challenge is not knowing what to do but doing it the right way.

The Global Fragility Act also identifies **three cross-cutting themes that should be integrated across interventions supported by the Global Fragility Strategy: strengthening state-society relations, curbing extremist ideology, and making society less vulnerable to the spread of extremism and violence** (Section 504(a)(2)). These themes are interrelated and supported by extensive research on civil war and political violence. Improving [state-society relations](#) is central to the concept of the state and the role of governance therein. The [spread of extremist ideology](#) is detrimental particularly to individuals who already feel dislodged from their societies or aggrieved by an unresponsive or discriminatory state due to poor state-society relations. The importance of [increasing the resilience of society](#) to extremism and violence is also supported by a wealth of research. More [resilient](#) and less vulnerable societies are, by definition, less likely to be subject to extremism and violence.

While there is **broad agreement on the importance of integrating these three cross-cutting goals into interventions, there is also significant evidence that shows how challenging this is to put into practice.** When there is a high level of antagonism between the [state and society](#), it is difficult for foreign aid implementers to [bridge this divide](#), particularly when they are rewarded for delivering short-term projects in concert with the society or with the state, but rarely with the state and society together. Curbing the spread of [extremist ideology](#) is challenging in an age where ideology can [easily be communicated](#) via [social media platforms](#) and the individuals people encounter in their everyday lives. Fostering resilience at the community level requires a degree of [long-term engagement](#) and investment that few aid agencies can produce and sustain. In other words, scholarship points to the significant challenges that the types of interventions called for in the Global Fragility Act are likely to face.

## THE HOW

Just because there is agreement on what needs to be done, that does not mean it is easy. **The “how” of foreign policy and assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states is even more challenging than the “what.”** The Global Fragility Act builds on existing research to identify *how* the U.S. government should engage in fragile and conflict-affected states.

### ***Coordinate within the U.S. government and create partnerships outside government***

- Coordinate across federal departments and agencies (Section 503 (1)).
- Coordinate with other multilateral and bilateral donors (Section 503 (2)).
- “Expand public-private partnerships and leverage private sector resources” (Section 504(a)(9)).
- Support “transparent and accountable multilateral funds, initiatives, and strategies to enhance and better coordinate private and public efforts to stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent violence and fragility globally” (Section 510(a)(3)).

*Members of the Conflict Resolution and Prevention Committee discuss monthly results at their office in Katana, Democratic Republic of Congo. Members of the committee are supported by Mercy Corps and a local partner. Since January 2018, they have resolved 18 disputes in the community regarding land, family, and breaches of trust. © Mercy Corps & Elizabeth Dalziel*





### ***Engage in conflict-sensitive assessment, monitoring, and evaluation, and do no harm***

- Improve assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of foreign assistance programs (Section 503(3)).
- Develop “more adaptive and responsive policy and program planning, implementation, and scaling” (Section 510(a)(1)).
- Reduce the risk that programs, policies, or resources “will facilitate corruption, empower or abet repressive local actors, or be exploited by extremists to gain support for their cause” (Section 504(a)(12)).

### ***Ensure real local and national ownership are integrated throughout programming cycle***

- “Ensure national leadership where appropriate and participatory engagement by civil society and local partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs” (Section 504(a)(5)).
- Ensure that programs are country-led and context-specific (Section 504(a)(11)).

While coordination, conflict sensitivity, and local ownership might seem straightforward, they are difficult to carry out in practice. Specifically, **the incentive structure surrounding foreign aid makes it difficult to coordinate effectively, be conflict sensitive, and create true local ownership.** In the next section, we synthesize the findings from the research that describe how the approaches outlined in the Global Fragility Act can be implemented to improve the effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states.



*Two fishermen in Tunga, Nigeria, October 2018. Mercy Corps-facilitated peacebuilding between fishermen and pastoralists was developed in response to violent conflict in the region around Tunga, in which thousands were killed and over 300,000 displaced. Moses, right, participated in a conflict-prevention forum – a facilitated dialogue between differing groups that offers a chance for everyone to voice their concerns – and a conflict management training that taught community members how to peacefully work through disagreements.*  
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# How the Global Fragility Act Can Change U.S. Foreign Assistance Operations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States

The success of the Global Fragility Act depends on how it translates its well-considered policy directives (the “what” and the “how”) into strategies, plans, and metrics. The challenge facing those charged with developing the 10-year Global Fragility Strategy, selecting the priority countries, and developing the priority plans, is to prepare a strategy and associated goals, plans, and metrics that change how U.S. foreign assistance is implemented in fragile and conflict-affected states.

The Global Fragility Act presents a historic opportunity for systemic change in U.S. support to fragile and conflict-affected states. Most organizational change processes begin with [this type of pilot effort](#), creating a new mode of operating in a small group of cases. See, for example, the [Future Lab of One Earth Future](#),



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which shows both the role of the co-creation of programming with conflict-affected populations and pilot initiatives in enabling “innovative solutions to complex problems.” The purpose of pilot efforts is to: 1) insulate the new initiative from broader institutional forces that may squelch it and 2) experiment with which types of new policies and practices work best. **This type of organizational change requires time, which the Global Fragility Act provides, and the freedom to co-create, learn, fail, improve, and learn again, which the Global Fragility Strategy should foster and protect.**

In particular, the Global Fragility Act devolves authority to U.S. missions in the field to implement innovative preventive programs, learn as they implement these programs, and take stock of what works, what doesn’t work, and why. Increased funding for conflict prevention and support for field-based learning provides U.S. agencies with new opportunities to take risks and innovate, which have previously been constrained by the government’s limited funding for prevention and general low risk tolerance for non-military interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states. In spite of the Global Fragility Act’s call for increased learning, the [broader incentives surrounding foreign assistance](#) focus on spending allocated funds in prescribed budget categories and reproducing past practices rather than experimenting with new ones. This incentive structure will make it difficult for U.S. missions to carry out the type of field-based innovation called for in the Global Fragility Act.

The creation of metrics and goals for the Global Fragility Strategy presents two potential challenges.

On the one hand, if the strategy’s goals, plans, and metrics are not detailed enough, they might not create change. Given how [bureaucracies work](#), it will be easier for the agencies and departments within the U.S. government simply to attach a new name to what they already do without actually changing what they do. This is the default approach in almost any institution. The Global Fragility Strategy can alter the U.S. government’s behavior only if it creates new goals, metrics, and associated incentives for U.S. agencies and departments to do so.

On the other hand, if the goals, plans, and metrics are too detailed and prescriptive, they might restrict opportunities for innovation and learning. As indicated above, the point of any pilot approach (even one that lasts 10 years) is to enable experimentation and learning. Pilot initiatives aim to help

the organization, its leadership, and staff figure out what works, figure out what does not work, try new approaches, and learn and adapt as they go until they find an approach that they want to scale across the organization.

This is a fine line for any strategy development process to walk and is particularly challenging for a strategy that aims to alter behavior across all the U.S. agencies and departments engaged in foreign diplomacy assistance. Nonetheless, for the Global Fragility Act to achieve its aim of establishing an institutional architecture to support the prevention of conflict and violent extremism, **the Global Fragility Strategy needs to create clear goals and metrics that will incentivize U.S. departments and agencies to focus on prevention, protect space for learning and innovation at the field level, ensure that U.S. departments and agencies build knowledge about what works and what does not, and support long-term strategic thinking about how to improve U.S. foreign policy and assistance in all fragile and conflict-affected states.**


In the following section, we offer guidance for the drafters of the Global Fragility Strategy based on existing research on aid effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected states. We present this guidance in the form of six signposts that point to how the drafters can address, and hopefully resolve, inherent tensions in the institutional reform process that the Global Fragility Act mandates.

### ***Signpost 1: Invest in generating shared knowledge on what works, what doesn't work, and why***

Investment in research on how implementation of the Global Fragility Strategy works and does not work will be central to its success.

Investment in research on [conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and prevention of violent extremism programming](#) has [fallen far short](#) of other more traditional

programming areas, such as development and humanitarian intervention. Most research on [prevention, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping](#) finds that these efforts have a positive, aggregate effect on a country's levels of violence or democracy. At the same time, scholars point to the numerous challenges facing international intervention in fragile and conflict-affected states, including corruption, weak governance and security institutions, difficulty of achieving lasting political settlements among warring parties, porous borders and illicit trade, and the bureaucratic rigidity of intervening organizations. For excellent syntheses of this higher-level research, see two recent books: [Governance for Peace](#) and [A Savage Order](#).



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While there has been a wide range of research on the factors that contribute to sustainable peace in the aftermath of war, this work has not investigated the relationship between specific programs or projects and overall levels of violence or cooperation in the conflict-affected country. As the [3ie evidence gap map on peacebuilding](#) shows, this gap in understanding results from methodological constraints as well as the absence of rigorous evaluations of conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming. While [recent efforts](#) have made important advances in our understanding of the



factors that lead to successful prevention and peacebuilding interventions, which are reflected in the recommendations of the Global Fragility Act, more research is needed.

This shortfall in knowledge accumulation is particularly costly because it is so challenging to implement effective conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and prevention of violent extremism programs. This type of programming aims to alter how a particular state and society function at a particular point in time. There is no full proof set of programs or approaches that can be applied to all contexts. Furthermore, because the conflict dynamics in fragile and conflict-affected states change quickly, it is often necessary to adapt the program during its implementation to ensure that the intervention remains relevant to the conflict-affected context. The adoption of the Global Fragility Act creates an important opportunity to improve the knowledge base of what works and what does not and to instill a culture of ongoing learning and adaptation across U.S. foreign assistance agencies and departments intervening in these contexts.

One way to accomplish this goal is to create a **new independent research governance unit** that would help synthesize lessons learned and knowledge generated in the Global Fragility Act's priority countries and ensure that it is shared with other countries and across the U.S. government. Ideally, the research governance unit would be independent from any single U.S. agency or department so as to truly serve a knowledge-generation and research function that is of value to all components of U.S. foreign policy and assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states.

In addition, the Global Fragility Strategy should ensure a strong research and evaluation capacity within each of the relevant U.S. agencies and departments to ensure that they have the in-house capacity necessary to support their program teams. If learning and knowledge are created outside the organization, they often stay outside the organization. In-house researchers can help programmatic staff integrate research and learning into their program implementation, conduct thorough assessments, and integrate past evaluations into the design of new programs to help ensure that evaluations are not simply treated as an accountability check box at the end of a program.



*Boko Haram is still very active in the area around this “garrison town” of Dikwa, Nigeria, where the military is able to provide safety within the town’s borders. Some 7,000 IDPs have sheltered here, receiving relative security that comes at the cost of their ability to farm and move freely, rendering them almost completely dependent on aid and able to do little more than wait until peace returns enough that they can return home or otherwise rebuild.*  
© Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps



## Guiding Research Questions for the Global Fragility Strategy

Based on the analysis presented in this policy brief, there are a number of questions that should ideally be embedded in the Global Fragility Strategy. Research on these questions would build the knowledge necessary to: 1) improve future interventions, 2) inform the biennial reports to Congress, and 3) help create a U.S. government architecture for prevention. Below, we provide several guiding questions for a potential Global Fragility Strategy research agenda, each of which merits further expansion.

### *The country context*

1. What are the primary drivers of fragility and violence?
2. How are the state and society involved in these drivers of fragility and violence?
3. Who is excluded and who is included in governance and the political economy of resource allocation?
4. What types of external engagement have been predominant in the country and what has been the broad effect of this engagement?

### *The “what” of programming*

1. What types of programming seem to be most effective at reducing the propensity for violence and extremism? For example, the GFA calls for programs that aim to foster rule of law, strengthen representative political institutions, enable security sector institutions to protect human rights, and create economic development for all, in addition to shorter-term reconciliation and dialogue efforts. When are these and other types of interventions effective and when are they not?
2. Does programmatic effectiveness vary according to these characteristics of the country context:
  - 2.1. the strength and reach of the state;
  - 2.2. the strength and degree of fragmentation of social institutions;
  - 2.3. the degree of past violence in the country or location;
  - 2.4. the degree of current violence;
  - 2.5. the number of armed actors, or
  - 2.6. the stability/insecurity of the surrounding countries?
3. Are the GFA’s cross-cutting themes integrated across programs and diplomatic efforts: strengthening state-society relations, curbing extremist ideology, and making the society less vulnerable to the spread of extremism and violence? If so, what is the effect? If not, why not?

### *The “how” of programming*

1. Who do U.S. government programs support or empower? Who do they disempower? Which groups are included and who is excluded in U.S. government programs? How does this compare to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the state and society?
2. Are conflict and fragility assessments integrated across interventions? Are related local-level indicators developed and monitored? Is this indicator-based monitoring complemented by participatory monitoring approaches that add context to the indicators?
3. How much are U.S. government staff able to go monitor and see what is being implemented? Are they simply receiving reports from implementing partners or are they engaged in joint problem solving and learning with their implementing partners?
4. How engaged are U.S. government staff with diverse local stakeholders? Have they established local accountability mechanisms? Are these local accountability processes integrated into decision-making about how the program is adapted and adjusted?
5. Are HQ and management supportive of risk-taking and learning by staff? Do they support potentially politically charged preventive actions by implementing agencies and country-based staff?
6. Are U.S. government missions and country-based staff given the authority and flexibility to coordinate with one another and with other partners in-country, around specific problems in the recipient country that require a coordinated response?

## ***Signpost 2: Combine top-down accountability with bottom-up innovation, learning, and accountability***

To ensure that U.S. foreign assistance is grounded in 1) conflict sensitive assessment, monitoring, and evaluation, and 2) integrates true local and national ownership throughout the program cycle, U.S. government agencies and departments need to combine top-down accountability with bottom-up innovation, learning, and accountability. (For further detail on these points, see my recent book, [\*Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding\*](#).)

**Top-down accountability:** Top-down accountability sets priorities. Whether manifest in compliance reports for accountants, program evaluations, or reports to headquarters or Congress, accountability aims to ensure that foreign assistance achieves the aims of the U.S. government and the people it represents. International aid is a foreign policy tool that aims to achieve particular objectives. For the Global Fragility Act, the objective is to prevent violent conflict and extremism. For the Global Fragility Strategy to ensure that U.S. foreign assistance focuses on the prevention of violent conflict and extremism, it must establish accountability mechanisms that enable federal agencies and departments to prioritize prevention above other competing priorities.

**Innovation:** Top-down accountability alone will not prevent violent conflict or extremism and can, in fact, undermine its success. The political context in conflict-affected countries is particularly fluid and dynamic. Preventive efforts aim to change this context. There is no certainty that any of these efforts will work, no matter how strong the implementer's knowledge base. Preventive efforts are inherently experimental – the exact conflict dynamics that preventive actions aim to mitigate have not occurred elsewhere in the exact same way. Preventive action, thus, requires programmatic experimentation and innovation in order to match the intervention with the particular conflict dynamics. No one knows what a particular country's trajectory out of violence looks like, even if policy documents articulate many potential [pathways](#). Each of the types of programming employed for the purpose of building peace or preventing violence or extremism are based on [theories of change](#) about what will lead to peace. By definition, these theories of change have to be adapted to and grounded in the reality of each changing conflict-affected context, both at the time of the program's design and during its implementation. To engage in this type of [learning](#), implementers have to be explicit about their theory of change, gather regular information about whether the program is achieving this desired change, and use this information about intermediary outcomes to question the relevance of the theory of change and to adapt the theory of change and the program to better fit the context and the preferences of the local and national stakeholders who are, in fact, responsible for sustaining any preventive outcomes that the program achieves.

**Learning:** Learning has multiple meanings. It can refer to the intake of information, but it can also refer to action taken (based on that information) to reduce the gap between the organization's aims and outcomes. It is the latter type of learning that matters most for intervention in fragile and conflict-affected states. To achieve complex outcomes in changing contexts, organizations need to question regularly whether they are achieving the change that they want to achieve, why, and why not. Implementing organizations have to question whether their theory of change fits the context and investigate whether they are implementing their theory of change. This requires [double-loop learning](#), which demands that organizations 1) regularly process real-time information about a program's success and failure in an open and non-defensive way and 2) take regular actions to reduce the gap between the program's aims and outcomes. Although double-loop learning matters

in all contexts, it is likely to matter most in [changing contexts](#) where there is uncertainty about exactly how the intervention should be implemented or if it is even the right intervention. Monitoring and evaluation can help double-loop learning, but they can also hinder it if information about intermediary program outcomes is not considered by decision-makers, failures are hidden, or adjustments to reduce the gap between aims and outcomes are discouraged.

**Bottom-up accountability:** To identify whether or not a program is having its intended preventive effect or whether its theory of change is right for the context, program staff have to establish relationships, feedback mechanisms, and trust with the national and local stakeholders most affected by the program. This bottom-up accountability is necessary for the effectiveness of conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and prevention of violent extremism programs. It ensures that program staff receive feedback about what is working, what is not, and what they can do about it. Bottom-up accountability, or [local accountability](#), requires that the local and national stakeholders who are most affected by the program are involved in the program, design, monitoring, and evaluation of the project. It requires that they are given the authority to hold the U.S. government and its implementing partners accountable for achieving high-quality outcomes in their countries. Without bottom-up accountability, the aid agencies' primary incentive is to spend money on the tasks outlined in their original project document, not to engage in the time-consuming work of ensuring that their original ideas and plans fit with the changing preferences and needs of people affected by violent conflict.

### **Implications for the Global Fragility Strategy and associated goals and metrics**

One of the important innovations of the Global Fragility Act is the institution of biennial reporting. By requiring that federal agencies and departments report to Congress every two years, the Global Fragility Act creates a valuable incentive for U.S. missions to work toward the aims of the Global Fragility Act. After all, incentives matter. Organizations work toward targets. Setting targets that focus on the core priorities of the Global Fragility Act will help ensure that U.S. foreign policy and assistance prioritize prevention of violent conflict and extremism. But if these targets are turned into detailed metrics, then the targets (not the needs on the ground) will determine what U.S. agencies and their implementing partners do “on the ground.” [If the focus is only on meeting measurable targets established in DC, then the focus is not on bottom-up accountability, learning, and innovation.](#)

So, what should the biennial reports monitor and report?

They should monitor whether regional and country strategies integrate one or more of the GFA's cross-cutting themes across their programs and, crucially, into their measures of success and failure, which should be developed specifically for each country context. The cross-cutting themes include: strengthening state-society relations, curbing extremist ideology, and making the society less vulnerable to the spread of extremism and violence.

They should monitor whether programs learn from and generate knowledge about the types of programming they are implementing (the “what” described above).

They should monitor whether programs implement bottom-up innovation, learning, and accountability strategies that include a wide range of local stakeholders (the “how”). By monitoring the “how” of effective preventive programming and implementation, Congress can help create the



incentive for federal agencies and departments to engage in the difficult and time-consuming work of localized program design, learning, and innovation.

If the goal of the 10-year Global Fragility Strategy is to improve the functioning of U.S. foreign assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states, each pilot country needs to refine and improve its knowledge base about the “what” and the “how” of prevention as it moves forward by monitoring and reporting on their learning. Monitoring the generation of knowledge about the “what” and the “how” will create the incentive for this type of knowledge creation.

They should monitor how the country context changes over time in relation to the baseline assessment of the causes of fragility and violence at the local and national levels (Section 504(a)(1)). But they should not attribute these changes directly to U.S. foreign assistance unless supported by evidence. Most of the broader changes in a country’s environment are due to the actions of multiple actors, and this aggregate effect is usually not attributable to any one intervener or even to any single donor.

### ***Signpost 3: Enable bottom-up coherence via top-down coordination***

The [fragmentation within the U.S. agencies](#) is part of the problem facing U.S. foreign assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states. U.S. departments and agencies often send contradictory messages to recipient governments, creating confusion within U.S. missions and between implementing partners. The solution, nonetheless, is not to focus even more time and energy on planning in DC that will only reinforce a top-down approach to intervention. The solution is for DC to support coordination at the U.S. mission level that responds to real problems in the fragile and conflict-affected country. Practically, this means that staff operating in the country have the authority to decide when, where, and how they should coordinate based on the type of response needed within the country. [This bottom-up coherence](#) can be better facilitated by putting the right people in the country office and giving them the authority to make decisions at the country-office level in response to real problems, needs, and preferences of national and local stakeholders. At headquarters, this requires removing (rather than instating) contradictory guidelines and procedures and adopting an overall strategy and approach for U.S. assistance to a country, without determining exactly what that assistance will entail.

A focus on bottom-up coherence that is driven by relationships at the country-office level also enables the U.S. government to operate similarly to many other bilateral and multilateral donors who have already streamlined their headquarter processes and decentralized decision-making authority to the country-office level. A more streamlined U.S. government, therefore, should enable partnerships that are more effective with other bilateral and multilateral actors in fragile and conflict-affected states.

### ***Signpost 4: Prevention aims to alter the status quo; give operational staff the political support to do so***

One of the most important differences between fragile and conflict-affected contexts and more stable contexts is that in more stable contexts, foreign assistance often aims simply to improve the ability of the state and society to do what they are already doing. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, foreign assistance aims to change what the institutions of state and society do.

## Yes Youth Can: Leveraging Diplomacy and Development to Prevent Violence in Kenya

**Challenge:** Following the disputed election in Kenya in 2007, armed groups of young people, stirred up by local politicians, killed more than 1,500 people and drove more than 500,000 from their homes across the country. In advance of the 2013 vote, the government was committed to preventing electoral violence and developed a multi-layered strategy that included both development and diplomacy.

**Approach:** Mercy Corps and other NGOs worked with youth groups and the government to build a grassroots constituency for peace. Through its \$53 million Yes Youth Can program, the government helped empower nearly 1 million Kenyan youth. The program helped 500,000 young Kenyans obtain national identification cards (a prerequisite to voter registration) and led a nationwide campaign with civic organizations to elicit peace pledges from all presidential candidates. Thirty-two programs trained hundreds of women and youth groups in how to prevent violence, how to map potential hotspots, and how to intervene to stop incidents from escalating. They also helped develop a youth movement, The National Youth Bunge Association, and leveraged sports to bridge ethnic divides. In addition to this development support, the government used its diplomatic influence to advocate for a free, fair, and peaceful election. President Obama took the extraordinary step of appealing directly to the Kenyan people through a video message, in which he urged Kenyans to “reject intimidation and violence and allow a free and fair vote.” Top diplomats engaged in private and public diplomacy to urge all parties to refrain from inciting electoral violence. The Embassy monitored the situation closely, and the Ambassador convened a biweekly Elections and Reform Task Force and an international Elections Donor Group to monitor and coordinate efforts.

**Results:** In contrast to 2007-2008, the 2013 elections took place largely without violence. Even when the election results were challenged by the opposition and civil society organizations, Kenya’s institutions were able to manage the tension with minimal violence. Following the elections, Kenya experienced significant stock market and GDP growth. The democracy and diplomatic investments to prevent election violence also saved millions of dollars’ worth of humanitarian assistance that would have been necessary to feed and house those who could have been displaced by violence.

The fact that prevention aims to change the status quo matters because it affects the nature of the intervention. Preventive programs no longer just entail implementing a pre-set program. Instead, they require the political support and partnerships necessary to create institutional change – even in environments where key interests will resist, as they are invested in the status quo. This means that seemingly operational or technical tasks require the support of higher-level leadership within the U.S. government. This may mean that senior-level staff have to be involved in the implementation of preventive programs, even by implementing partners.

### ***Signpost 5: Strategize for the long term but adapt in the short term***

One of the challenges facing the Global Fragility Act is that agencies and departments that administer foreign aid are prone to develop detailed plans. The entire development aid industry operates around one- to five-year plans, and related contracts, that specify a program’s or project’s goals, objectives, activities, inputs, outputs, outcomes, impact, and related indicators. These

intensive planning processes rely on the assumption that once the development agency has developed its detailed plan, all it needs to do is implement it. As argued above, this type of programming does not fit the reality of fragile and conflict-affected countries and may not even be suited to more stable contexts.

The Global Fragility Act challenges federal agencies and departments to think and plan for the long term but respond and adapt in the short term. Under this approach, planning becomes a strategic process based on a vision of long-term change driven by the problems in a particular country. Harvard's Center for International Development has put forth the best model of how to do this, the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). Under the PDIA model, plans developed at headquarters become relatively useless because the only solution that matters is one developed in concert with stakeholders in the recipient country. In conflict-affected countries, to ensure that plans foster inclusion rather than exclusion, these stakeholders would need to represent diverse groups in society and government.



**The plans guiding implementation of the Global Fragility Act need to be driven by long-term strategic thinking, with decentralized authority given to country-level offices to create flexible plans in collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders within the country.**

The Global Fragility Act requires that federal agencies and departments prepare 10-year plans for the selected priority countries and regions that describe how all U.S. actors will work together to implement the GFA in the particular country and region. There is a risk that these country and regional plans take the plans the U.S. departments and agencies have already prepared and simply relabel them. Alternatively, U.S. departments and agencies could produce detailed new plans that are so rigid and prescriptive, they squash adaptation and learning on the ground.

Instead, the plans that guide the implementation of the Global Fragility Act should be driven by long-term strategic thinking. They should ideally decentralize authority to the country-office level in order to enable collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders within the country. They should support and enable adaptation and learning in response to real-time feedback about how implementation is progressing, what is working, and what is not.

***Signpost 6: Choose priority countries and regions where success is possible but so is failure***

The Global Fragility Act (Section 505) outlines criteria that must be used to select the priority countries and regions where the Global Fragility Strategy will be implemented. As with any case selection process, there are criteria that should remain constant across all cases and criteria that should vary between cases. The criteria that remain constant are those that the drafters think matter all the time and should be present in all cases, such as whether the country fits with U.S. national



security interests and whether it qualifies as a fragile or conflict-affected country. Then, there are criteria that vary, such as the degree of open violent conflict in the country (Section 505(a)(2)).

To improve the capacity of U.S. foreign assistance in fragile and conflict-affected countries, it is important to choose countries that also vary in the likelihood of success of the Global Fragility Strategy. As outlined in the Global Fragility Act (Section 505(a)(1)(C)(ii)), it would be tempting among these challenging countries to choose those where the likelihood of success is high. But if the likelihood of success is already high, then what difference would the Global Fragility Act make? To improve foreign assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states, it is important to choose priority countries where both success and failure are possible. By ensuring the selection of priority countries that represent variation in the broader universe of fragile and conflict-affected countries, including middle-income countries, the Global Fragility Strategy can accumulate the knowledge necessary to build a broader prevention architecture relevant to the wide range of circumstances in fragile and conflict-affected states. By ensuring a diverse range of priority countries, the U.S. government will better understand how it needs to engage differently with different contexts and help identify new opportunities for quick and constructive engagement in other non-priority countries.

### Key dates and timeline for the Global Fragility Act

Action	Actor	Timeframe	Date
Submission of Global Fragility Strategy to Congress	President of the United States, along with relevant federal agencies and departments	270 days after enactment of the Global Fragility Act	September 15, 2020
Submission of priority country selection and detailed 10-year strategy for at least five priority countries	President of the United States, along with relevant federal agencies and departments	One year after enactment of the Global Fragility Act	December 19, 2020
Submission of first biennial progress report	President of the United States, along with relevant federal agencies and departments	Within two years after enactment of the Global Fragility Act, then biennially after submission of the Global Fragility Strategy and priority country selection report until the end of the 10-year strategy	December 19, 2022

# THE PATH FORWARD

The Global Fragility Act presents an unprecedented opportunity to improve the effect of U.S. foreign assistance on fragile and conflict-affected countries. The Global Fragility Act not only put forward a clear timeline and process, but it has given U.S. departments and agencies the opportunity to set their own strategy. The six signposts discussed above are, according to existing research, necessary guides along this path. Foremost, the Global Fragility Act offers an opportunity to take short-term actions that will have potentially large downstream effects, particularly if the authors of the Global Fragility Strategy and national and regional plans integrate long-term thinking about a U.S. government prevention architecture into their strategic and planning processes. We welcome questions and invite further discussion of these issues.

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### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action – helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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