Isabel Rocha de Siqueira

‘FRAGILE STATES’ IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD

The Role of the g7+ in International Diplomacy and Development Cooperation
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1. A Book about People
The Stories of the g7+

‘The fight against injustice cannot but be emotional and it will help mutual understanding if this simple truth is remembered.’

In a traditional Somali story, Igal Shadad is “bound by duty to find a better place for his family and animals: both are under the mercy of a relentless drought. Under such conditions, the [provider] in the homestead is required to travel far and wide until he finds a place with pasture and water... Travelling at night, and away from his homestead, Igal comes across a menacing object on the ground. He cannot surmise or ascertain the real identity of the object, which, to him, looks like a lion, ready to strike. He decides to wait the night out. Finally, at daybreak, he finds out the identity of the object that had rendered him motionless through the night: a tree stump.” What the fictional character thought has roughly been transfigured from traditional Somali storytelling into the following: “What I thought of you, and what you actually have become, and what will not be repeated.” The story makes one laugh so that one can conquer real fears. At the same time, it recommends that we expect the unexpected and avoid walking in dark nights.

There are many dangers in this world. Some are dangers to one’s physical survival—the lion ready to strike; some are dangers to a person’s beliefs and the teachings held in one’s heart—the indignity

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1 Remark by Sri Lankan prime minister Sirimavo R. D. Bandaranaike, in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in 1976. Much of the Conference of Bandung’s and NAM’s spirit, if not the major components, is present in the stories in this book.

of cowardice; and others are a combination of all the small and large challenges that cause one to fail to prepare for these other dangers, or render one incapable of doing so because of lack of skills or resources—the journey in the night with no light.

Igal is a fictional character. How do real people cope with terrible challenges they may face? And how do they learn? What are their real fears? The dangers to body and soul, such as hunger, lack of access to medicines, constraints in access to education, inequality, violence, and conflict are routine, and attempting to tackle the bigger and most vital challenges, such as finding long-term political solutions to such problems, can often feel like travelling in the dark. The world is still highly unequal: The 2022 World Inequality Report indicates that ‘[t]he share of the bottom 50% of the world in total global wealth is 2% by their estimates, while the share of the top 10% is 76%. Since wealth is a major source of future economic gains, and increasingly, of power and influence, this presages further increases in inequality.’ Overall, inequalities within countries have increased, while inequalities between countries have declined, yet ‘despite this decline, between-country inequality remains very high in absolute terms: in 2020, it is roughly at the same level as it was in 1900’. The same holds for intangible goods such as peace: ‘Since 2008, the 25 least peaceful countries deteriorated on average by 16%, while the 25 most peaceful countries improved by 5.1%’, revealing the snowball effect conflict-affected countries know so well, which sees problems compounding each other.

If one is looking to solve problems at this scale, if we are honest and generous, we would probably find there are rarely any heroes, and the villains are often in disguise. Besides, going back to our metaphor, most people don’t travel alone, and whether they make many mistakes or only a few, the scope of such errors often depends on their travel companions. But then the story of Igal, used here as a figurative illustration, becomes too complicated. And what is the purpose of this story, anyway? What place does it have in explaining the hard facts of the world? I believe the

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everyday and personal stories often have an important role to play in understanding political possibilities.

I have no idea how to tell complicated human stories, much less ones that go from individuals to groups of all sizes. And I dislike simplifications. Instead, in the following pages I shall attempt to offer a little bit of what a popular story like Igal’s conveys with some simplicity, amid a vast field of moral reflections for anyone to explore. It is an ambitious goal, so please bear with me. By the way, I don’t appear in the story. But as the hand doing the writing, I will unavoidably come up. Please ignore me.

First, the setting:

We are in a world where the key physical threats to human survival—poverty and violence—have been addressed in recent decades by a huge machinery of frameworks, budgetary formulae, experts, modalities of funding and local people themselves (that elusive category). We may call this the development field, but there are also humanitarians and security professionals involved. Actors can generally be divided between development partners (formally known as ‘donors’) and partner countries (usually, poor and conflict-affected countries), but these are far from settled categories as they vary from context to context. The currency we are mostly talking about here is assistance or aid, in the form of financial, material and other resources.

Despite all the aid that has been provided to this date, nevertheless, there has been many a dark night for some.

The results of all that investment have been profoundly unequal. Fragile and conflict-affected states\(^6\) still have 3.5 times the percentage of the world’s poor ‘than would be expected if poverty were equally prevalent everywhere’, and that is probably an underestimate.\(^7\) Extreme

\(^6\) The term ‘fragile’ is controversial and not used lightly here. I have discussed the terminology extensively elsewhere, see: Rocha de Siqueira, Isabel (2017). Managing State Fragility: Conflict, Quantification and Power. London: Taylor and Francis. The term is not used by every representative in the g7+, nor is it used in every context. It is, however, the term that was originally embraced by the group. Today, this is complemented by ‘conflict-affected’ in most cases, or else only the latter is used. I choose to use both in this book to simplify matters, but a more detailed discussion is provided in the box on p. 122.

poverty was considerably reduced between 1990 and 2015, but the rate of reduction has shown signs of decline since 2013.\(^8\) That means the urge to find pasture and water is not only still very much present, but might require even more energy and perseverance.

Reading a summary of current world events might have felt like reading a dystopian novel even before the onset of the new coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19):

The number of violent conflicts is at a 30-year high, and fragility impacts 28% of the world’s population. Only 18% of contexts affected by fragility are on track to meet selected SDG targets [Sustainable Development Goals]. More people are displaced than at any time since the end of the Second World War. The past four years have been the warmest on record and the trend is almost certain to continue.\(^9\)

The pandemic has indeed made these issues even worse, especially for the poor and those affected by conflict: per capita gross domestic product contracted 7.5% in 2021 and per capita income is not expected to reach 2019 levels in fragile states until 2024.\(^10\) Not only that, but vaccination has become another cruel marker of inequality. It is estimated the typical (median) fragile state will reach a vaccination target of 70% of their population by July 2025, ‘while the typical extremely fragile context will reach it by December 2034. By comparison, 23 OECD members have already reached the target.’\(^11\)

Now come the characters:

Very recently, it seems ‘the global aid system support[ed] some 15,000 donor missions in 54 recipient countries per year—and in some countries this amount[ed] to over 20 official visits per week’.\(^12\) This is a lot of people, missions and official attempts to ‘fix’ things. The business-as-usual is a crowded space.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 22.
In these visits, on the other side of the proverbial table (‘because we [development partners and partner countries\(^{13}\) somehow always seem to sit facing off each other’\(^{14}\) ), there are also fascinating characters. Like all characters in a story, they have different personalities, make mistakes and have flaws. In any case, they are the ones who have to find water and pasture more often than not in an unequal world. They are not necessarily so different from the others in donor missions, nor are they bound to be similar to each other. The story does not intend to make them so. But it is a story about them and how that story came to be.

The plot:
Those who can do so ought to shine more light on the dangers lurking in the dark: hunger, poverty, inequality, conflict and so on. Our main characters have been pushing for such light to be shone on a regular basis, so that, when one light goes out, another is readily available, and no family will go without water, or animals without pastures because a person could not travel to look for them; this is about preparedness, and about the unacceptable reality of basic needs not being met when the world has enough resources to do so. Moreover, one should include peace among these needs, for no amount of material resources can provide quality of life without peace.

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\(^{13}\) Terminology used generally in the field, respectively attributed to ‘donors’ and ‘receivers’.

\(^{14}\) Interview with Hodan Osman, 24 April 2020.
But the world is not prioritizing prevention. Since 2015, there has been ‘a shift towards responding to emergency situations rather than addressing the drivers of crises and fragility.’ In recent years, only a small portion of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) has gone towards conflict, peace and security—this amounted to only 4% of ODA provided by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to fragile contexts in 2018, for instance.\textsuperscript{15}

There are other interconnected complicating factors in the plot. Cooperation means acting together, but recently, multilateralism has been under threat:\textsuperscript{16} ‘trust in governments and institutions is plummeting and populism, protectionism and exclusive nationalism are on the rise’.\textsuperscript{17} In that context, it can be difficult to harness solidarity in order to face complex problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, or the fact that insecurity in some countries often serves the political or economic goals of other governments and companies.

The truth, nevertheless, is that a reliance on external support has always meant being vulnerable to crises and changes in political mood. This is why the characters in this story keep repeating that self-sufficiency is required: as the people most interested in there being fewer and fewer dark nights, they want to have more say in how the light system works.

Now, the point of view:

This is a tricky story to tell. There will be real facts and events and there will be the narrator’s perceptions of the people whose stories are being told. That means I will retell the stories that have been told to me and my team, and also add notes of my own. I will mix and combine them in an order of my own devising, to offer something more that can perhaps be extrapolated from these individual stories. In that way, the people involved are presented as very much themselves in their rich individualities, but, most importantly, they are also their brothers and sisters, children, neighbours and colleagues. The idea is to tell \textit{kinds} of stories, to open space to see what certain stories can achieve.

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\textsuperscript{15} See OECD (2020). \textit{States of Fragility}, Executive Summary.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 19, box 1.1.
We are used to reading and writing long reports about the technicalities of the lives of the Igals of the world. Those are important too (although there are probably too many of them). Recently, organizations have experimented with quantifying facetime, that is, face-to-face meetings, measuring intercultural dialogues and ‘modernizing’ narratives in order to harness solidarity in the face of increasing distrust of any multilateral action. These experiments aim to understand the impact of doing things collectively and to learn how to create incentives for such practices. They ask: how relevant is it to spend time together—really, physically together? How important is it, to international development initiatives in general, to speak the same language, share the same culture? How essential is the element of identification for the presence of empathy and the willingness to trust when it comes to negotiating peace, for instance? And yet, if you ask people doing public policy in difficult contexts, a lot of what is done is due to pure and simple joy, which is something that cannot be quantified, nor designed. Much of the joy people find when working with each other comes from deep beliefs and commitments that were passed on in the family and the community, many of which are not seen in reports.

The stories that follow try to offer some of these elements.

Behind the Scenes

I have been working on fragility for some years now, and I closely followed the foundation of the g7+ in 2010, a group now composed of 20 countries who self-identify as fragile states. I have also coordinated the Independent Review of the g7+ in 2019. During their tenth anniversary, in 2020, the group commissioned this book as a publication meant to talk about the people involved with the g7+. However, as the pandemic

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21 See www.g7plus.org.
unfolded, other challenges took center stage in our lives, and thus this book has had a long journey to publication.

Above all, it is a book about people. It is not a technical report (for that, see the 2019 review\textsuperscript{22}); it is about a political agenda, but we understand that by listening to those who previously worked for, or currently work for the g7+ in various capacities, discovering who they are, how they came to believe in politics and policy, how they feel about their work and the work they do for the group, how their family and communities relate to the work they do and what they would love to see in the next generation, including from their own children. The broader story is about values, commitments, mistakes and challenges at a personal and collective level. It is a story (or many stories), therefore, that probably rings true to anyone who has tried to organize and work in a network of very different people, complete with all the joy and the difficulties this entails.

People have shared many hours of their time and even personal memorabilia with me in the process of researching this book, and it has been an honour to receive them. I have focused on different characters for diverse reasons: sometimes I want to focus on the time they have spent with the g7+, sometimes on how new they are to this agenda, or what they have to tell us about it. Unfortunately, not all those who have been involved with the group can be featured here. Those who are featured are not all presented the same way; I let the story guide how it should be told. I could not meet all of the contributors in person, not least because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed. But as I said, I am not important in the story to come; it is about their meetings and exchanges with each other. To some extent, their narratives are personal, but importantly they are also collective and represent what the g7+ stands for, and all the unavoidable shortcomings that entails.

I should also mention that the g7+ works with two official languages, French and English. The conversations were held in those languages, in addition to Portuguese, which many spoke and is mine and my team’s mother tongue. Some of the poems and proverbs cited were born in other, indigenous languages. That the book is in English, therefore, means choices were made about how to translate what was said, and

\textsuperscript{22} Rocha de Siqueira, Isabel (2019). \textit{Independent Review of the g7+, BRICS Policy Center—International Relations Institute (PUC-Rio).}
we are aware translations have their limits. This is only one of the many challenges with this book.

In addition, I should say that I am an academic, and this is not what my work usually looks like (but more and more I think academic work should read more like it). The fact that I am writing it means that, after 12 years, there is an opportunity to try and do justice to the incredible life stories that compose the group I have been observing from afar. It is also a reflection of my belief in people and our capacity to thrive. In that sense, it is an attempt to change my own conversations slightly, in order to focus on anything that can help us to create structures that might encourage younger generations to engage with politics and policy with a generous disposition. The worst that can be done, in the setting and within the plot I have just described, is to have people disengage. But how do we offer hope in this context? I believe that the people telling their stories in this book have a lot to say about hope. In fact, their hope is a wonder.

I had a few sources of academic inspiration in mind that served as a guide to the way the conversations were held and how they are reported here. Mostly, I think this book is an exercise in pluralizing voices in an unequal international system. Not only are fragile states not often at the centre of international decision-making, but their civil servants are seldom invited to speak about how they manage their work. This book is not simply an exercise in filling space by reproducing first-hand testimony such as diary entries; it is a way of collecting memories and, through it, making the broader picture of international affairs more complex. As the inspirational sources show, there is a sense in which history is a story told by the experts, by scholars and authorities; it is one, while memory opens itself to being individual and collective at the same time, and, therefore, plural. In this way, memory also poses a challenge to the idea that there is only one history to tell. Here, such thinking helps us frame the fragments of personal stories into a collective undertaking of pluralization, whereby the notion that there has been a linear, progressive engagement with the poorest people and those most affected by conflict is problematized by several instances when this narrative had to be made to hold together in the face of reality. In this sense, we encounter the anecdotes and struggles of individual lives and, at the same time, through the g7+, we can perhaps see the
material, symbolic, and functional roles such groupings can play, as platforms that provide counternarratives, with all the many restrictions an unequal international system and the very nature of politics pose to such endeavours.\textsuperscript{23}

Indeed, in that sense, the stories are perhaps more relevant because they express the hope that permeated the search for a voice with the g7+ than because they reflect the capacity of these voices to address inequalities effectively. They reflect certain aspirations and ambitions, which, in turn, are born in a context of possible solidarity. These accounts do not deliver an epical story of underdogs speaking up, but a mundane account of how people found ways to talk about themselves while believing that the group could lead to some change. By the time the g7+ was founded, after all, there was much criticism about the fact that emerging countries, such as the BRICS, and most developed countries were not exactly demonstrating a willingness to pay the price of a fairer system when it came to fragile states. At one early point in the formation of the g7+, comments made were along the lines of, ‘the BRICS have done little to alter the prevailing patterns of marginalization and inequality within the world economy’.\textsuperscript{24} It was in this context that the g7+ came to be and why many of the stories recounted express some hope of speaking up to major organizations and the richest governments, but also relief in speaking with each other, even if this does not ultimately translate into major political influence or material gains, which is nonetheless—and always will be—a cause of frustration.

When it comes to the angle this book provides, we can say the conversations we had and that are reproduced here were not interviews; they were ‘ethical encounters’, where my team and I tried to build humble ‘relations of testimony’, actively hearing instead of listening in ‘too literal a way’.\textsuperscript{25} For the latter, there are technical reports. One


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 147.

point of interest is how the testimonies invite us to imagine the often challenging and daily bureaucratic work that sustains public policies and politics in these countries. This is not to be romanticized in any way, but to compose a plurality of experiences that often escape the pages.

The Book

The story will be divided in five parts. Together, they tell us of how the g7+ fights to have a collective voice. They also show the paths its members have walked to find their own voices and what they have been doing since. The group and the people feed into each other; they share frustrations and expectations.

Part one is about negotiating skills and what makes a diplomat, even if an accidental one. It tells of the many, many back-and-forths one has to endure in politics. The capacity to navigate these turns is often the result of complex historical reconciliation processes that have taken place in a community; it is also intimately connected to the experience of incredibly steep learning curves across generations. These diplomatic practices, to some extent, are instance of ‘new diplomacy’ or a ‘transprofessionalization’ of diplomacy, involving the mobilization of new actors, skills, and methods, but also the challenges of ‘learning the game’.26

Part two focuses on survival. It explores the life experiences that have led the members of the g7+ to develop a profound respect for equality of opportunities and, most crucially, for those who not only survive but see their lives as an opportunity to do something, to help others. Survival imprints a deep feeling of commitment, but also guilt, which can result in a person working well beyond any job description and paying high personal costs to accomplish a mission. These are stories that also tell us about the innards of public administration in post-conflict societies and the difficulties around identity issues and postcolonial relations.27

Part three, not coincidentally, is about how to work with passion; this is a difficult how. Passion helps bring people closer together; it nourishes solidarity; it empowers leadership. Passion can be dismissed in bureaucratic development work, being supposedly opposed to “the scientific” and liable to lead to failure. But many have denounced this dismissal. This book agrees with the latter position: it is about ‘initiatives that rekindle the kind of passions — about inequality, about fairness, about improving the lot of poor and excluded people — that for many were the reasons for getting into these jobs in the first place’.

But we need also remember that, unfortunately, passion is easily dismissed as a sign of naiveté or lack of skills. These are indeed real risks and working with passion requires avoiding these pitfalls as much as any others.

Part four is about pride, in great measure, because it is the one element that has brought all of the above aspects together in the past. The history of the people in this book is full of moments of pride, which has been instilled in them from a young age by family and community. The chapter is about the enormous challenges involved in having to learn on the job what others might take years to patiently build step-by-step, which, although hard, is also a reason to be proud and confident later in life. This part of the book, however, is also about the ability to shed some of this pride or stow it away temporarily in order to do things that others might not deign to do, because the prize ahead is not one’s own, but a collective achievement.

Finally, the last part of the story is about responsibility and the sense of duty. One thing that everyone in this book has in common is their unrelenting belief in the future, their hope for the next generation and their understanding that they have a responsibility to foster a sense of duty in younger people. There is no room for pessimism, and this itself is a conversation-starter. I have also found both a deep commitment to the

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idea that one is responsible for keeping one’s own house in order, and a belief in the promise of giving back to one’s people and community.

In line with that hope in the future, the book ends with some of the promising lines of action ahead: not failing to point to problems and challenges, but sharing in the responsibility of outlining some possible paths forward. This is based on the plans and dreams of the people with whom we spoke. It is important to note that some of the chapter titles, and even the perspective from which the chapters are written and their sequence, aim to offer some advice from one generation to the next in the g7+ countries, as per my interlocutors’ own wishes. In a very humble way, the book was commissioned with that in mind, to share how one uses their skills and experiences to fight against a ‘poverty of influence’ when the ladder has been kicked away.30

