

Monkey Cage

The OECD's fragility index is surprisingly fragile and difficult to reproduce

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In its [2015 States of Fragility report](#), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) decided to complicate its usual one-dimensional list of fragile states by assessing five dimensions of fragility: Violence, Justice, Institutions, Economic Foundations and Resilience. This change shows conceptual progress toward an understanding of what exactly fragility means and how the international community should tailor its response to different types of fragility. With the new framework, it is clear that Benin — vulnerable in resilience and economics — has different development needs than Cambodia — vulnerable in justice and institutions.

Unfortunately, something went wrong during the calculations. In my attempts to replicate the assessment, I found that the OECD misclassified a large number of states, a mistake that could have real-world repercussions. Recent [research by Judith Kelley and Beth Simmons](#) shows that international indicators are an influential policy tool. Indicators focus international attention on low performers to positive and negative effect. They cause governments in poorly ranked countries to take action to raise their scores when they realize they are being monitored or as domestic actors mobilize and demand change after learning how they rate versus other countries. Given their potential reach, indicators should be handled with care.

The easiest way to understand the OECD fragility assessment is with the impressive visualization of the results, a five-dimensional Venn diagram that I call the Pentagram of Fragility. For each of the five dimensions, the OECD created an index by taking the average of three inputs that are normalized to range from 0 to 100. For example, the Violence dimension is calculated by taking the average of a country's scaled values on number of battle deaths, number of interpersonal injuries, and political instability indicator from the World Bank. The 50 countries with the lowest averages are considered vulnerable in that dimension. The pentagram and the report focus on those countries that are vulnerable in two or more dimensions.

Do the classifications make sense? With indices like this, cherry-picking a country and arguing against the result is like shooting fish in a barrel. Afghanistan stands out as it is listed as vulnerable in every cluster except Institutions. Is that credible? Afghanistan regularly [ranks near the bottom on corruption indicators](#). Gen. John R. Allen [identified](#) corruption as “the existential threat to the long-term viability of modern Afghanistan.” How then did Afghanistan not make the bottom 50 for the Institution dimension?

After replicating the classifications, I found Afghanistan does belong in the Institutions cluster. However, Afghanistan wasn't the only one; more than half of the countries are misclassified! It is impossible to say what went wrong since the report does not follow any of the replication best practices that are highlighted in the

