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Beyond the comfort zone: bringing empirical research to fragile countries

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Despite almost a quarter of the world's population living in fragile countries, only around 3% of published research in top economics and political science journals focuses on them.

Most of this work is clustered in a few countries. It concentrates on a few methodologies, mostly randomised controlled trials (RCTs), and themes, mostly political economy. This limits the scope of what can be learned for fragile countries.

Conducting research in fragile countries is possible. The number of published papers in fragile countries is increasing, while the share relying on self-collected data is decreasing, suggesting that investments in data infrastructure can help support research.

Policymakers need evidence of what works when traditional state capacity is weak, infrastructure is damaged, and populations face compounding crises.

The characteristics that make fragile countries important to study also make them challenging research environments. The places where innovative solutions are most needed are precisely those where we have the least evidence.

What works in stable developing countries may fail entirely in Syria or Yemen, where the fundamental constraints are different, such as collapsed state authority, non-existent banking systems or active warfare preventing physical access. Without research tailored to fragile contexts, we risk applying ill-suited policies to the world's most vulnerable populations.

Introduction

The world is becoming more fragile. Climate shocks, conflicts, and political instability are intensifying, pushing more people into fragility. Nearly a quarter of the global population lives in countries classified as fragile or extremely fragile (OECD, 2025). As poverty increasingly concentrates in these settings (Corral et al., 2020), policymakers need evidence of what works when traditional state capacity is weak, infrastructure is damaged, and populations face compounding crises.

Yet the characteristics that make these places important to study – their insecurity, weak institutions, and unreliable data systems – also make them challenging research environments. The result is a troubling mismatch: the places where innovative solutions are most needed are precisely those where we have the least evidence.

What works in stable developing countries such as India or Brazil may fail entirely in Syria or Yemen, where the fundamental constraints are different: collapsed state authority, non-existent banking systems, active warfare preventing physical access, among other factors. Without research tailored to fragile contexts, we risk applying ill-suited policies to the world's most vulnerable populations.

This review examines the state of academic research in fragile countries, revealing both concerning gaps and emerging opportunities in our understanding of development's hardest challenges.

Our analysis reveals three striking patterns: severe under-representation of fragile countries in top journals, extreme geographic and methodological concentration, and encouraging signs that barriers to entry are falling. While data constraints remain a key challenge, a companion piece (Ali et al., 2026) showcases innovative approaches that have been used to collect data and answer critical questions in these settings. Together, these reviews demonstrate that while conducting research in fragile countries is challenging, the growing body of work proves it is both feasible and necessary for informed policymaking in these contexts.

A note on methodology

To better understand the challenges and opportunities researchers face in fragile countries, we reviewed the academic papers on economics and political science conducted in these countries.

We used Web of Science to find all papers published between 2005 and 2025 in the top 11 journals in these two fields that mention at least one of the countries categorised as

fragile by the OECD's State of Fragility initiative in 2025.[1] Excluding irrelevant papers (such as theoretical papers, or short papers published as American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings left us with a sample of 394 papers. We trained ChatGPT to review them and identify the main topics of contribution (political economy, education…), the methodology used (RCT, correlational…), and the type of data used (self-collected, administrative…). To compare against trends in the field of development economics in general, we downloaded data on all National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers between 2005 and 2024 from Goldsmith-Pinkham (2025) related to economic growth and development economics.[2]

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[1] The journals were: the American Economic Review, the Quarterly Journal of Economics, Econometrica, the Review of Economic Studies, the Journal of Political Economy, the Journal of the European Economic Association, the Review of Economics and Statistics, the American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, the American Political Science Review, the American Journal of Political Science and the Journal of Politics. See Appendix Table A1 for a list of fragile countries according to the OECD. There is little change in countries classified as fragile over time. Sixty-six countries have been classified as fragile or extremely fragile since the first OECD fragility report in 2016, and only five of those were not classified as fragile in 2025 (Nepal, Lesotho, Benin, Egypt, and Honduras). These countries are excluded from the analysis, although they have few publications in these journals. Web of Science gives a match only when a country is mentioned in the title or the abstract. This means that we will have some false positives (i.e., papers assigned to a country because it was mentioned in the abstract, even if the paper doesn't use data for that country) and false negatives (i.e., paper that are not assigned to a country because said country was not mentioned in the title or abstract, even if the paper uses data for that country).

[2] We downloaded data on all working papers in JEL Category Q ("Economic Development, Innovation, Technological Change, and Growth"), and we also did a key word search for the different methodologies used in those papers (e.g., instrumental variables, RCTs), conditional on the paper belonging to this JEL Category. There are 3,844 development economics NBER Working Papers between 2005 and 2024.

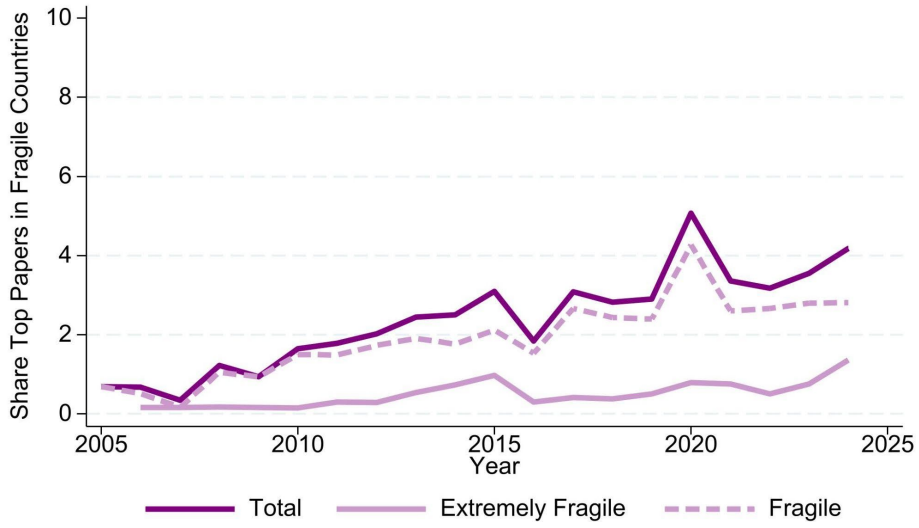
Findings

1. Despite almost a quarter of the world's population living in fragile countries, only around 3% of published research in top economics and political science journals focuses on them.

The share of published papers since 2005 starts from a very low base, but has been steadily increasing. Figure 1 shows the yearly share of papers published in these journals since 2005 that use data from fragile countries.[3] In the late 2000s, only around 5-7 papers were published per year in fragile countries (around 1% of all published papers). This has increased to over 30 per year. However, the share of papers using data from fragile countries remains very low, although it has been steadily, but slowly, increasing, fluctuating around 3% since 2015. This is also relatively low compared to academic papers in development economics in general; when looking at NBER Working Papers, the share of papers in development economics has fluctuated between 15-20% in recent years (see Figure A1).

Extremely fragile settings, which face severe challenges across all dimensions of state capacity, are even more under-studied than fragile countries, which have significant but more limited vulnerabilities. Figure 1 further breaks down these trends by whether the country is fragile (dashed light purple line) or extremely fragile (solid light purple line). Unsurprisingly, most papers come from fragile countries, not those experiencing the highest levels of fragility.

Figure 1. Share of top published papers in fragile countries



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.

[3] The number of papers published each year in each journal comes from scimagojr.com. For the American Economic Review, we count articles by hand to exclude AER P&Ps.

Notes: Share calculated as the number of papers published in a given year that mention a fragile country in the title or abstract, divided by the total number of papers published in a given year across the 11 journals considered. The dark purple line shows the share for papers in fragile and extremely fragile countries, while the light purple lines show the shares for papers in fragile only (dashed) and in extremely fragile only (solid) countries, according to the OECD classification of fragility.

This shows that fragile countries tend to be relatively under-studied: whether by total or by relative number of publications, academic papers have largely overlooked them. This is despite the fact that development economics as a whole has become an active part of mainstream research in economics and political science, and that the number of people in (extreme) poverty has been clustering and is expected to continue clustering in fragile states (Corral et al., 2020). Areas where more and more people are living are being ignored by top research: while almost a quarter of the world's population lives in fragile countries, only around 3% of published research in economics and political science focuses on them.

The next section shows that this research is highly concentrated – geographically, methodologically and thematically – limiting how much fragile countries can learn from it. Data limitations and the difficulty in working in these areas are likely key constraints in this regard (Ali et al., 2026; Idris, 2019).

2. Most of this work clusters geographically, methodologically (mostly RCTs) and thematically (mostly political economy), limiting the scope of what can be learned for fragile countries.

In terms of the geographical distribution of the papers, we observe a high degree of concentration among a few countries. Figure 2 shows the number of papers published in fragile countries (Figure A2 in the Appendix shows a bar chart with this information).

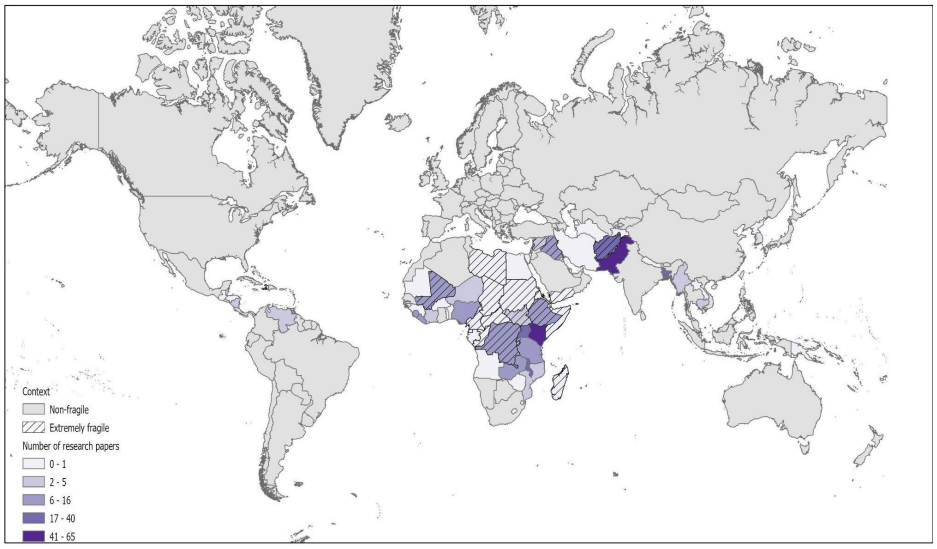
By far the most common fragile country in which this type of research takes place is Kenya, with 66 publications (17% of the total), followed by Pakistan, Uganda, Bangladesh, and Malawi. Outside the 10 fragile countries with the most publications, the publications per country rapidly decline: no country outside the top 10 has more than 11 publications over the 20 years we consider.

> **Of the 66 countries that the OECD has classified as fragile since it started producing its fragility reports, 29 have no academic publication at all.**

In fact, of the 66 countries the OECD has classified as fragile since it started producing the State of Fragility reports, 29 have no academic publication at all (including, for example, Yemen, Togo and Nepal), 11 have at most two publications in the last 20 years, and the top 10 countries account for 70% of all publications. These patterns are worrying because, coupled with the lack of academic studies in these regions documented above, most of the research

comes from a very narrow set of countries, further narrowing the evidence base in fragile countries.

Figure 2. Geographic concentration of published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.

Notes: Darker colours represent more papers published using data from a given country. Non-fragile countries are shown in grey; fragile countries in colours.

This clustering has tended to focus on less fragile settings. The OECD distinguishes between fragile and extremely fragile countries. In Figure 2, we can see, in a striped overlay, those countries that have been at any point classified as extremely fragile (20 countries), with other countries classified as fragile (46 countries).

Only two extremely fragile countries are in the top 10 of countries with most publications, and the average extremely fragile country has 6.2 publications compared with 13.5 for fragile countries in general (conditional on having at least one publication).[4]

The extremely fragile country with the most publications is Afghanistan, which is unsurprising considering that it had a strong American presence until recently. Given the high levels of investment in development programmes and data collection by the US, this setting is less representative of the capacity and infrastructure available in other extremely fragile countries. Potentially, the countries in the most difficult situations and where evidence is most needed are those where we have the least research.

We also observe clustering in the methodologies used. Figure 3 shows the share of papers using commonly applied methods. It shows the shares of published papers (in purple) and of development economics NBER Working

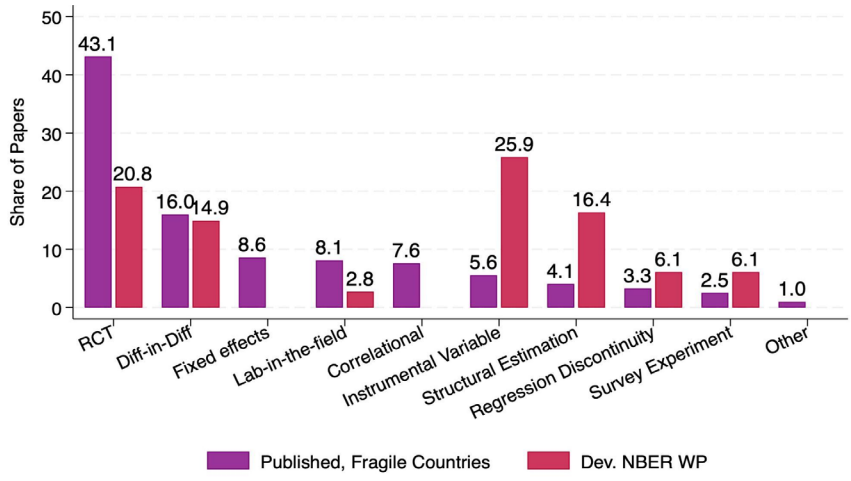
[4] Unconditionally, the figures are 4 and 7 publications on average, respectively.

Papers (in red) using each methodology. For published papers in fragile countries, RCTs are by far the most common approach, at 43%. Other popular methods include Difference-in-Difference (16%), Fixed Effects regressions (8.6%) and lab-in-the-field projects (8.1%). The concentration of papers using RCTs potentially indicates limitations that researchers face in accessing high-quality, reliable data in these contexts, since RCTs mostly rely on self-collected survey data.

This concentration in RCTs does not match the trends in economics as a whole. Looking at a similar sample of journals in economics between 2015 and 2018, Brodeur et al. (2020) find a much more even distribution of methodologies across all papers published.[5] When looking at NBER Working Papers on development economics, we see a similar pattern, with RCTs being used in one-fifth of papers.[6] This suggests that research in fragile countries is methodologically very different from research in economics in general, and even in development economics.

While RCTs are methodologically sound and a useful tool for answering important policy-relevant questions, they are also limited in the questions and topics to which they can be applied, and the type of evidence they can generate is very specific, particularly regarding external validity.[7] Therefore, this reliance on RCTs skews the knowledge base from fragile countries.

Figure 3: Methodologies used in published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals (purple), data on NBER Working Papers from Goldsmith-Pinkham (2025).

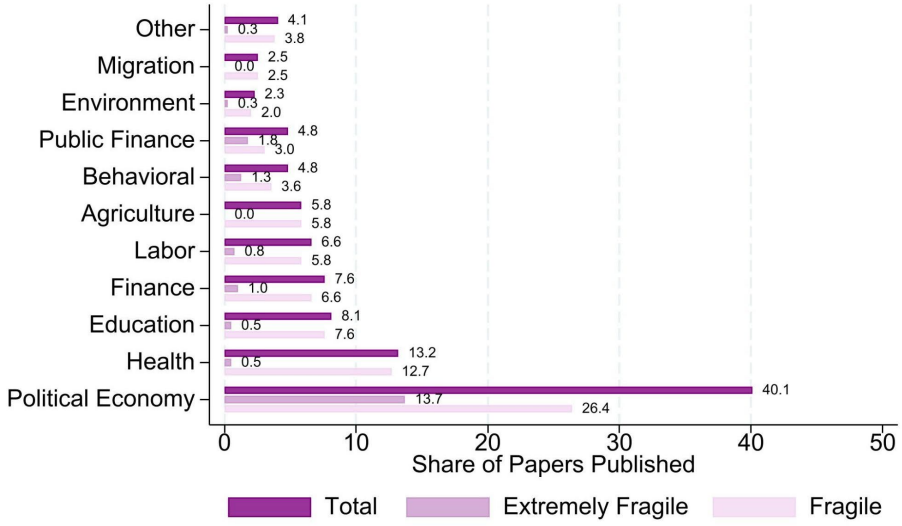
Notes: In purple, each bar shows the share of published papers in fragile and extremely fragile countries that use a given statistical methodology; in red, each bar shows the share

[5] In particular, the most popular method used in around one-third of papers is Instrumental Variables, then RCTs and Difference-in-Differences with around a quarter each, and Regression Discontinuities with around 10%.
[6] For NBER Working Papers, given that we are doing a keyword search of each paper, methodologies such as fixed effects and correlational are ignored, since these could be spuriously mentioned in papers using other methodologies (for example, it is normal to add fixed effect in the analysis of RCTs).
[7] See, for example, Deaton & Cartwright (2018) for a critique of RCTs.

of NBER Working Papers in development economics that use a given statistical methodology.

When looking at the topics studied in fragile countries, we observe a thematic clustering. Figure 4 shows the main field to which the papers in these countries contribute: more than 4 in 10 focus on questions of political economy, with health and education a distant second and third, each with around 10%. This likely reflects the fact that fragile countries face complex political situations that are well suited for research on political economy. On the other hand, this also means that many important areas in which fragile countries need evidence, such as education and health, are relatively under-studied. The clustering in methodologies and topics has persisted, as shown in Figure A3, suggesting the pattern is unlikely to change soon.

Figure 4: Topics researched in published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.

Notes: The dark purple bars show the share of published papers in fragile and extremely fragile countries that investigate a given topic. The light purple bars disaggregate this total for extremely fragile and fragile countries. Given that a paper can contribute to multiple topics (e.g., labour and agriculture), ChatGPT identified the topic it contributed most to, which is the one used in this Figure.

This triple concentration – geographic, methodological, and thematic – limits our understanding of fragile contexts. The evidence base is not just small, it is also narrow. We are learning primarily about political economy questions that can be studied through RCTs in a handful of relatively accessible countries such as Kenya and Uganda, while the most fragile settings remain 'research deserts'. This means policymakers working in Yemen, Somalia, or the Central African Republic must extrapolate from research conducted in fundamentally different contexts.

Moreover, critical sectors in which fragile countries need evidence-based interventions, such as health and education, remain under-studied. The

dominance of RCTs, although it ensures rigorous causal identification, also limits the scope of questions that can be asked: we cannot randomise state capacity, peace agreements, or macroeconomic shocks. Without diversifying where, how, and what we research, we risk building a body of knowledge that fails to address the spectrum of challenges facing the quarter of humanity living in fragile settings.

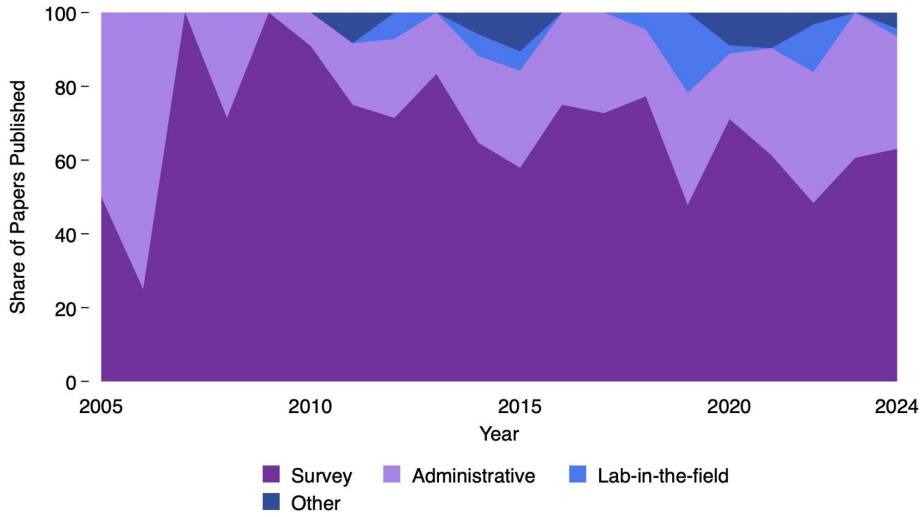
However, as the next section shows, conducting research in fragile countries is possible, and there are positive developments in terms of data access and infrastructure that will continue lowering the costs of such research.

3. Conducting research in fragile countries is possible. The number of published papers in fragile countries is increasing, while the share relying on self-collected data is decreasing, suggesting that investments in data infrastructure can help support research.

Despite these challenges, there are reasons for optimism. Our data reveal that conducting research in fragile countries is not only possible but increasingly feasible. The absolute number of papers has grown sixfold since 2005 and, more importantly, the infrastructure supporting this research is evolving. While early pioneers had to rely on collecting data themselves and build everything from scratch (training enumerators, establishing relationships with local authorities, developing context-appropriate survey instruments), newer researchers can increasingly build on existing foundations.

Figure 5 shows a shift in how data is being collected in fragile settings. While 65% of papers still rely on self-collected survey data, this has declined from over 80% in the 2000s. Administrative data now appears in almost 40% of papers, suggesting that even in fragile contexts, governments and organisations are developing data systems that researchers can access. This trend is particularly pronounced in countries that have sustained research presence over multiple years, where initial investments in data collection have created reusable infrastructure.

Figure 5: Source of data used in published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.

Notes: The figure shows the share of papers using data from different sources in each year for which data are available.

The concentration documented earlier has an unexpected silver lining: it demonstrates how research begets research. The Democratic Republic of the Congo provides an instructive example. What began with a handful of economists building relationships and survey infrastructure in specific regions has evolved into more robust research infrastructure and know-how, reducing barriers to entry for other researchers.[8] These pioneers did not only produce papers: they trained local enumerators, established protocols for working with local authorities, and created templates that subsequent researchers could adapt. Similar patterns emerge in Afghanistan, where extensive data collection by international organisations created opportunities for rigorous analysis even in active conflict zones.

Technological advances are also lowering barriers to entry. Mobile phone penetration enables phone surveys even in insecure areas where in-person enumeration would be impossible (a recent example is Callen et al., 2025, in Afghanistan). Satellite data provides information on economic activity, agricultural productivity, and conflict events without requiring ground presence. Digital financial services create administrative data trails in economies that were previously entirely cash based. These innovations, detailed in our companionpiece (Ali et al., 2026), mean that researchers have many pathways to access high-quality data to conduct research.

The trajectory is clear: while fragile countries remain challenging research environments, they are becoming progressively less prohibitive. Each published

[8] See, for example, the work of the NGO Marakuja.

paper represents not just new knowledge but also infrastructure that makes the next study easier. The question is no longer whether research in fragile settings is possible, but how to accelerate this virtuous cycle. Strategic investments in data infrastructure, sustained research programmes rather than one-off studies, and greater collaboration among researchers could transform our understanding of the most complex challenges in development.

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Appendix

Table A1. Fragile and *extremely fragile* countries according to OECD State of Fragility Initiative 2025

Angola
Bangladesh
Burkina Faso
Cambodia
Cameroon
Comoros
Côte d'Ivoire
Djibouti
Ethiopia
Gambia
Guatemala
Guinea
Guinea-Bissau
Iran
Iraq
Kenya
Kiribati
Lao People's Dem. Rep.
Lebanon
Lesotho
Liberia
Madagascar
Malawi
Mali
Mauritania
Mozambique
Myanmar
Niger
Nigeria
Pakistan
Papua New Guinea
Rwanda
Sierra Leone
Solomon Islands
Tajikistan
Timor-Leste
Togo
Turkmenistan
Uganda
Venezuela, RB
West Bank & Gaza Strip
Zambia
Zimbabwe

Afghanistan
Burundi
Central African Rep.
Chad
Congo, Rep.
Dem. Rep. of the Congo
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Haiti
Libya
Somalia
South Sudan
Sudan
Syrian Arab Rep.
Yemen

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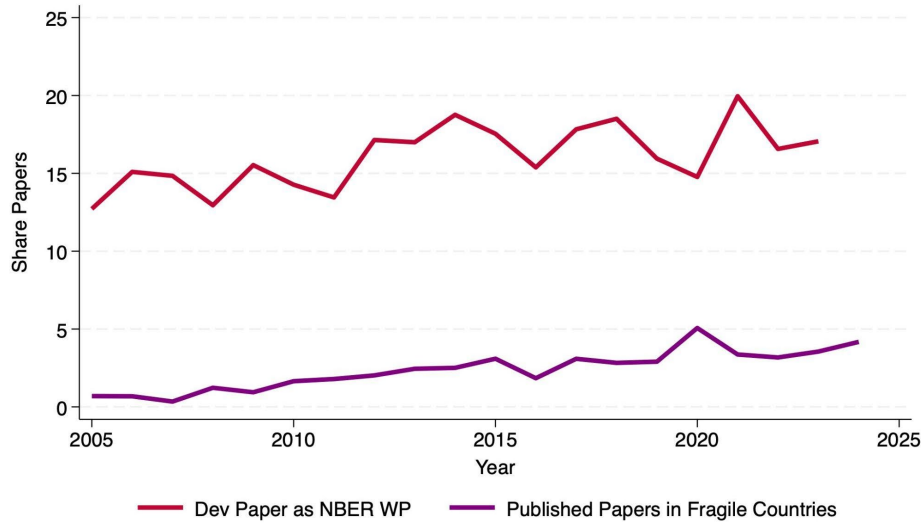
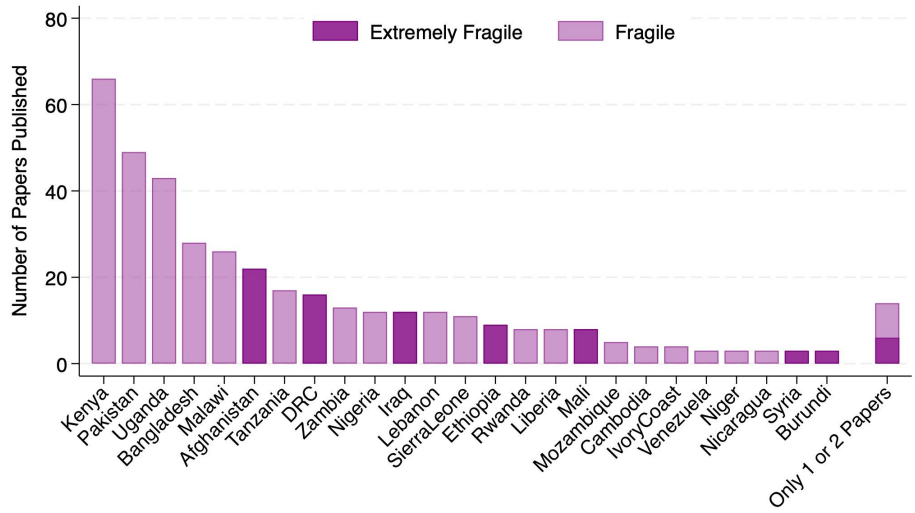
Figure A1: Trends in papers published vs. NBER Working Papers in development economics



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals (purple), data on NBER Working Papers from Goldsmith-Pinkham (2025).

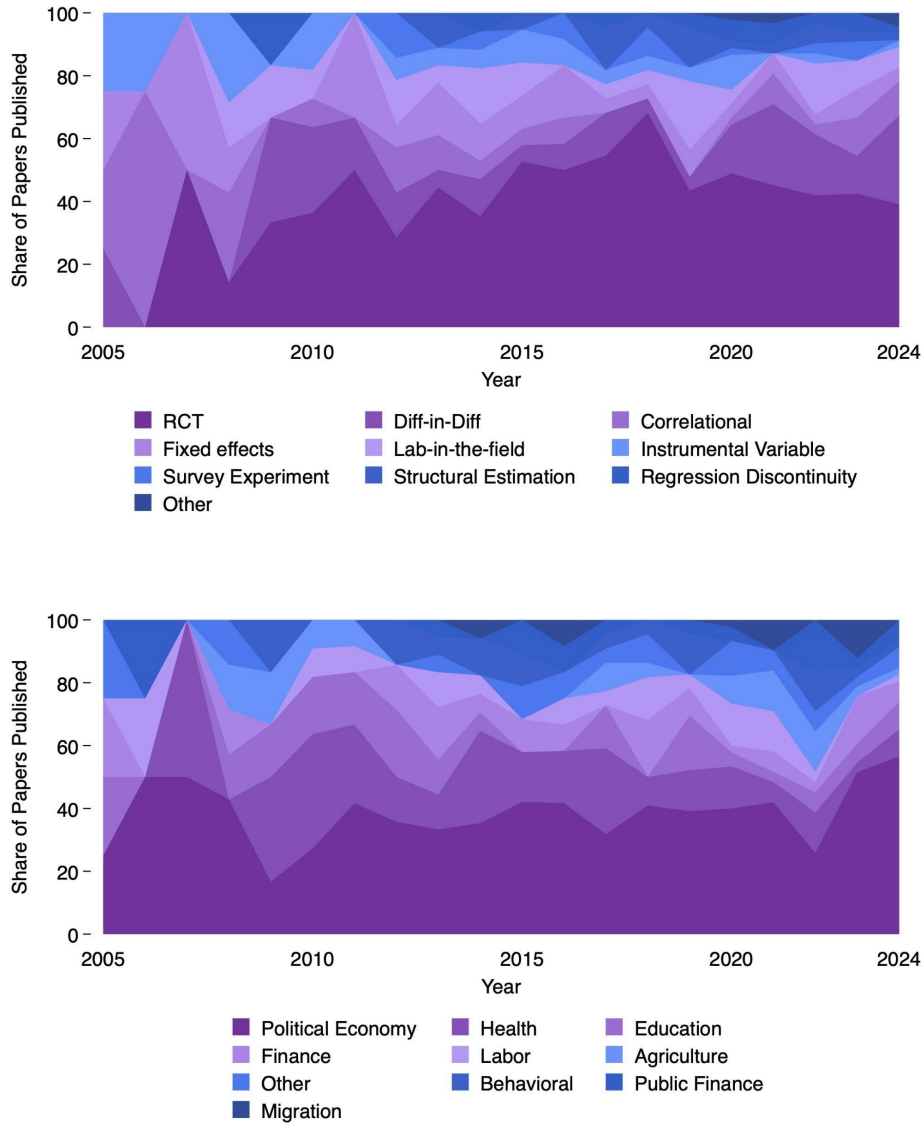
Notes: In purple, share calculated as the number of papers published in a given year that mention a fragile country in the title or abstract, divided by the total number of papers published in a given year across the 11 journals considered. In red, the share of NBER Working Papers in development economics (JEL Category Q).

Figure A2. Geographic concentration of published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.
Notes: The dark purple bars show countries classified as extremely fragile, while the light purple bars show countries classified as fragile according to the OECD classification of fragility.

Figure A3: Evolution of methodologies and topics in published papers



Source: Self-collected data based on all published papers in top economics and political science journals.

Notes: Each figure shows, for all papers in fragile countries published in a given year, the share using a given methodology (top panel) and looking at a certain topic (bottom panel).

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