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INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION
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Challenges to the Stabilisation Landscape:

The case for Rethinking Stability

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Quai Perdonnet 19
1800 Vevey
Switzerland

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Executive summary

In the last twenty years, international stabilisation efforts have become the dominant international approach to reducing conflict and building peace in fragile areas. Their stated purpose is to reduce violence and lay the structural foundations for longer-term stability and peace, but this has rarely been achieved. The sources of instability in fragile and conflict-affected communities are contextual, historical, and diverse: in this maze of grievances and insecurity, actors charged with stabilising contested communities can easily be overwhelmed. In addition, the world is more violent than it has been for thirty years,¹ with newer conflicts in the Middle East and the Russian attack on Ukraine sadly joining a number of seemingly intractable conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. Violence by non-State actors and organized crime is higher than it has ever been, and proxy conflicts involving numerous actors have continued to intensify as competition between major powers steadily grows. To make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to exacerbate conflict and stoke new insecurity, while climate change is putting unparalleled pressure on people and governments coping with diminishing resources.

Recognising this complicated context, Interpeace, the Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik (BAKS), the German Federal Foreign Office, and the Atlantic Council are collaborating on an initiative called ‘Rethinking Stability’. This action-oriented, two-year initiative aims to bridge the operational gap between military, civilian, diplomatic, security, and peace-building actors who currently work to control instability. More fundamentally, the project seeks to understand a central problem of stabilisation efforts: how, where, and through what operational mecha-

nisms and modalities can these different actors collaborate better to prevent conflict and build long-term peace and stability? The project further aims to understand the challenges facing the current ‘stabilisation toolbox’, asking what approaches and interventions, including incentive structures, promote or inhibit cooperation and engagement between actors? In doing so, this report hopes to contribute to much-needed donor reforms at a time when, as we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere, getting it wrong is becoming increasingly costly – above all for those living in conflict-affected environments.

The report sets out a number of specific factors that prevent stabilisation from achieving its aims. To begin with, the concept itself is contested as well as politically and technically complex. Donors who act together to stabilise a country seldom share the same definitions, visions, or processes. Competing definitions skew expectations of ‘stabilisation’, which may imply anything from a ceasefire to a full State-building agenda. Conceptual ambiguity and institutional specificities also cause humanitarian, development, peace, and security actors to adopt competing operational priorities. Despite numerous efforts to bridge professional silos and improve civilian-military cooperation, results remain elusive. The UN lacks an organization-wide definition entirely, despite spending approximately USD 3bn annually on stabilisation missions. Importantly, this conceptual imprecision has caused frequent misalignments between missions’ and actors’ strategies, timelines, methods, and resources.

Beyond definitions, stabilisation efforts² have taught donors a number of costly lessons. Three are par-

1 United Nations and World Bank (2018), ‘Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict’.

2 Stabilisation is a contested term. As this paper is intended for a wide stabilisation audience, terms such as ‘stabilisation

ticularly important, not least because they amplify each other. First, donors often initiate programmes without adequately understanding the context, interests, capacities, and experience of beneficiaries or national and local partners on the ground. Successful stabilisation requires a level of knowledge of contested communities that few people possess even of their own home towns. Who are the power brokers in and out of government? What are the local identity groups? How do the lives of people in those groups differ? Who is in conflict with whom, about what? How have conflicts played out? What are the experiences of women? Who resolves people's problems? Who do residents look to for protection? Who outside the community has an interest in what happens there? How has that interest been expressed in the past? By answering these (and many other) questions, it is possible to construct a robust political and economic analysis that will improve programming and the effectiveness of stabilisation activities. In the absence of such an analysis, stabilisation efforts risk exacerbating conflict drivers.³

Second, donors frequently try to stabilise the most dangerous areas first. While such an approach is intuitively attractive, in practice it is extremely difficult to win the hearts and minds of people in contested communities (for example by offering them social services and infrastructure) if they are in constant danger. It is far more productive to stabilise communities that are teetering on the edge of instability and work from there towards more problematic areas. In other words, donors too often rush to make gains they cannot sustain, frequently lack the information they need to design sound interventions, and tend to prioritise communities that are wary of external involvement.

Third, working from incomplete conflict analyses and incorrectly rushing to stabilise the most contested areas first has caused interventions to stall, miring actors in inhospitable areas, and displacing rather than addressing the drivers of instability. With insufficient appreciation for how long stabilisation will take, and weak monitoring and evaluation processes that would otherwise reveal better courses of action, disappointment when progress is

not immediate makes donors more likely to withdraw prematurely or operate insensitively.

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Even if a stabilisation effort is well conceived, it can be ruined by its structure. Large efforts demand large coalitions, which are unwieldy and involve convoluted divisions of labour. Different donors have different mandates and resources. As a result, though coordination should be carefully designed from scratch, it often appears more like a patchwork. Even within one donor, coordination between civilian and military actors can be troublesome. Particularly among donors, civilian actors are generally better equipped to determine which areas are ready for politically sensitive stabilisation, but military officials often make the critical decisions because they are more numerous, better resourced, and can venture into less accessible places.

Staffing donor-led stabilisation efforts is also a challenge because it demands skills and experience that few donors recruit and train for. Some donors take an improvised approach to training and staffing, rather than a contextual one. As a result, each effort appears to be staffed like the one before it. As personnel systems cannot adapt to fast moving conflicts, donors struggle to hire the right people for the right jobs at the right time.

Stabilisation efforts also appear to be being asked to achieve too much, too quickly. There are some tasks where stabilisation actors ought to take the lead, but others where better integration and coordination with complementary fields would likely be more fruitful. For example, building the relational aspect necessary to bridge between different sections of society and ensure changes are locally supported and take root is a task best left to civilian officials, mediators, and peacebuilders. A contested community needs formal or informal leaders

activities' or 'stabilisation efforts' are used to capture the broad approaches undertaken in the sector. More specific terms, such as 'operations' or 'missions', are used deliberately where necessary.

3 Yayboke, E., Staguhn, J., Shah, H., Dalton, M. (2020), 'Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization: Lessons from beyond the Beltway', Center for Strategic and International Studies.

that are representative of the community, are active on the ground, and can direct and take credit for local progress. Without such people, the positive effects of stabilisation funds spent in a community are likely to evaporate quickly. Indeed, it is the relationships that stabilisation projects build as much as the physical outputs of the projects themselves that generate improved stability. What matters is bringing different actors together in good faith around shared or understood interests. In addition, numerous employment projects are currently being implemented in conflict areas, but there is little evidence that short-term employment on its own reduces violence in communities: relationships and peaceful coexistence, not material improvement alone, build stability.

Another challenge is that stabilisation programmes must be flexible and willing to experiment, learn, adapt, and improve, but most donors are unwilling to permit their staff and programmes to be this agile. Such an orderly mentality appears incompatible with work in conflict-affected environments. Instead, in conflict environments it is particularly important to stay flexible and responsive by monitoring and evaluating stabilisation programmes. Each intervention must be specific and honest about what and who it is stabilising, how improvement will be measured, and how data will be collected in an active conflict zone where traditional techniques are logistically challenging or methodologically fraught. In addition to collection, data must be acted on.

This connects to a final but central challenge: how to support the return of legitimate governance structures. The return of the State is at the core of most theories of change, but in practice has been difficult to facilitate in ways that are inclusive and secure popular legitimacy. It is clear, however, that overly focusing on the central government, securitising one set of elites and turning national capitals

into fortresses, has not proven a recipe for stability. Exploitative elites, corrupt bureaucracies, and captured or poorly functioning institutions have all been propped up in the interests of immediate stability, only to emerge later as significant obstacles to reform and new sources of popular grievance. This version of ‘stability’ can only be sustained by continued international military support, and is far removed from the inclusive, self-sustaining stability that people living in conflict affected areas require. Indeed, in many environments, State security forces often appear to be sources of instability themselves, preying on the populations they are meant to protect.

Thus, the challenge is that the return of the State may be important but brings significant risk. In response, stabilisation efforts must think far more critically about what part of the State should return in each location, and how, taking a people-centred approach as they do. International stabilisation interventions need to be principled about who they work with, not only because it is the right thing to do, but to achieve the peace and stability outcomes they seek. Interventions are far more likely to achieve positive long-term stabilisation when they support elites and security forces that are committed to political inclusivity and human rights, and want to rebuild relationships with the public. Simply training and deploying more security actors will never be sufficient.

Future Rethinking Stability publications will look at what the initiative is learning and suggest actionable improvements to help the field better meet its objectives. For now, we hope that this report provides a sober top-level assessment of some of the main challenges facing donor-led stabilisation efforts, and begins to show how more inclusive political strategies, principled approaches, and realistic timelines may generate better outcomes.



1. Introduction

The sources of instability in fragile and conflict-affected communities are as diverse as attempts by the international community, local civilian and military officials, and non-governmental organizations to counter them. In this maze of grievances and insecurity, actors charged to reduce conflict and stabilise contested communities can easily be overwhelmed.

The current global landscape is enormously challenging for security and peacebuilding actors alike. The COVID-19 crisis threatens to exacerbate existing conflict dynamics, stoking insecurity, violence, and conflict. The world has become more violent: intra-State conflicts are surging, as is State and non-State actor violence, and organized crime is at the highest level ever.⁴ In addition, competition between major powers has increased and proxy conflicts have continued to intensify, involving a growing number of actors in several world regions.⁵

The operational know-how that external actors apply to deal with violent and fragile environments is often flawed. Working in partnership, Interpeace, the Atlantic Council, the Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik (BAKS), and the German Federal Foreign Office are collaborating on an initiative called ‘Rethinking Stability’. This action-oriented two-year initiative aims to bridge the operational gap between stabilisation actors and explore possible

reforms required to make stabilisation fit for purpose. It will address a central challenge for conflict and crisis prevention efforts: how can security and peacebuilding actors collaborate effectively to prevent conflict and build long-term peace? Where are opportunities for cooperation to be found? What operational mechanisms and modalities help most to achieve this objective? But also, where does stabilisation fit into the wider context of development and peacebuilding activities? This report is a positioning paper. It introduces the toolbox of approaches and interventions that is currently in use among donors and discusses its limitations. It also evaluates incentive structures and practices that inhibit cooperation and engagement with local actors, who are often best placed to lead. It initiates a much-needed rethink about donor reforms at a time when missteps and errors have become increasingly costly.

Specifically, this report explores:

1. The evolution of stabilisation and its underlying concepts.
2. Stakeholders and their approaches to conceiving and implementing stabilisation.
3. Lessons that can be learned from how stabilisation efforts are conceived and structured.
4. Operational best practices when preparing, implementing, and evaluating stabilisation programmes.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>.

⁵ <https://olc.worldbank.org/system/files/Pathways%20for%20Peace%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

A cascading problem set

Sources of instability have a way of feeding off each other. For example, a government that cannot protect or politically include certain populations will create security, governance, and service delivery voids that non-State groups may fill. This typically triggers a harsh security response, which may well restore State monopolies of force, but at the same time tends to harm civilians, erode trust and reduce social services. Far from building stability, the effect is to exacerbate pre-existing grievances, create new grievances, and further isolate communities from formal government. Meanwhile, in both a symptom and a cause of worsening security, a dangerous increase of competition between communi-

ties is accompanied by a fall in the perceived cost of using violence. Sensing opportunity, external and internal non-State actors often stoke such communal conflicts. As a result, any steps the government takes in response are likely to be interpreted as taking sides, polarising the conflict further. What started as a governance problem can rapidly develop into a multi-pronged war, in which every prong must be addressed in a delicate, co-ordinated, and balanced way. Yet most fragile countries have minimal experience of addressing problems of such complexity, and the international community can show them few, if any, examples of 'stabilisation' that have worked.

2. What are donor conceptions of stabilisation?

Donors have used the term ‘stabilisation’ differently and sometimes haphazardly. Whereas everyone more or less agrees that, at a minimum, it describes attempts to correct a negative trend in violence, there is little clarity on how, or in what conditions, ‘stabilisation’ should take place. In the absence of a clear definition, stabilisation tends to be (re)conceived and (re)interpreted on the basis of donor or host government interests.

In 2009, the U.S. Institute of Peace was among the first to attempt a definition of stabilisation. It suggested: “Ending or preventing the recurrence of violent conflict and creating the conditions for normal economic activity and nonviolent politics”. More precise definitions have emerged over time; these increasingly put the State at the core. For example, with Afghanistan and Iraq clearly in mind, in 2011 USAID defined stabilisation as: “Strengthening the reach and legitimacy of the central government in outlying regions”.⁶ Here too, the assumptions appear to fall short. Even if the State is obviously important, it quickly became clear in places like Afghanistan that the ‘return of the State’ and subsequent government predation frequently drove communities into the arms of violent non-State actors and increased instability.

The UN failed to adopt a precise definition even though ‘stabilisation’ was in the title of UN missions to the Central African Republic (CAR), Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, and elsewhere. Some UN practitioners have dodged the question, choosing to describe stabilisation as either ‘late peacekeeping’ or ‘early peacebuilding’.

The result is that efforts in different countries have applied nebulous definitions in a range of diverse environments. Meanwhile, while the international community poured enormous resources into stabilising Iraq and Afghanistan, donors seemed to be unable to decide whether stabilisation was simply the development component of counterinsurgency, or a process that could take place independently of security operations. As they worked through this ambiguity, stabilisation progressively came to be conceived as one of two things: it was either a simple addendum to military or counter-terror operations in certain very dangerous areas; or (worse) it was indistinguishable from counter-terror operations.

As donors began to scale back their efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the idea and definition of stabilisation became more nuanced. By 2017 the German government was arguing that: “Stabilisation measures may serve to consolidate legitimate political authorities by supporting them in their efforts to offer the population a more persuasive and inclusive vision which is more attractive than competing models of political power exercised”.⁷

In the same year, the EU argued that stabilisation is “a transitory or bridging period” that generates “a more stable political settlement” by “helping countries and/or communities to prevent or reduce violence”.⁸ In 2019, the UK Stabilisation Guide offered a similar definition of stabilisation. It was “an activity undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence ... to protect the means of survival and restore basic security, promote and support a political process to reduce violence as well

⁶ USAID, ‘Our Work’, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/our-work>.

⁷ Federal Government of Germany (2017), ‘[Preventing Crisis, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace](#)’, p. 69.

⁸ Council of the European Union (2017), ‘[EEAS/Commission services’ issues paper suggesting parameters for a concept on Stabilisation as part of the EU Integrated Approach to external conflicts and crises](#)’, p. 4.

as prepare a foundation for longer term stability”.⁹ The U.S. government’s 2018 Interagency Stabilisation Assistance Review perhaps went furthest in this direction, defining stabilisation as:

*A political endeavour involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence. Transitional in nature, stabilisation may include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, and deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and longer-term development.*¹⁰

What these recent definitions have in common is the idea that, to prevent violent conflict, a contested community needs formal or informal support, usually in the form of programmes that kick start a healthy style of governance. This idea of stabilisation coalesces around people-centred political interventions that have a near-term security objective, connect contested communities to central govern-

ment, and start to construct a social contract built on achievement of the initial security objective.

This indicates that donors are rethinking the notion that stabilisation exclusively requires strengthening State authority and institutions; at the least, State strengthening should also prioritise qualitative, people-centred dimensions of reform. These approaches appear increasingly open to the idea that ‘legitimate’ institutions that need strengthening are not always formal and not always located in a distant capital, especially in countries that have not had strong governments for many years, if ever. For donors and partners, this flexibility creates new opportunities for stabilising contested communities; but it is also a Pandora’s box. It is already hard to make a government more legitimate and help it provide services to the population. It is far harder to adopt an expansive concept of ‘legitimacy’, understand how legitimacy is perceived in each community, and tailor an appropriate approach that will promote it. This shift from building infrastructure to making communities more harmonious brings stabilisation closer to peacebuilding.

9 UK Stabilisation Unit (2019), [‘The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policymakers and Practitioners’](#), pp. 13-14.

10 US Department of State (2018), [‘Stabilisation Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximising the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilise Conflict-Affected Areas’](#), p. 4.



3. Stabilisation stakeholders and approaches

The perspectives and interests of stabilisation stakeholders are often specific to the government they represent, the multilateral organization they work for, or the professional field in which they work. For example, there has long been tension between—and efforts to bridge—the fields of humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding—the so-called ‘nexus’.¹¹ Likewise, security forces, diplomats, and stabilisation professionals bring equally diverse but important perspectives and tool-kits to the problem. These six ‘fields’ also overlap in some ways, as outlined below.

3.1 Stakeholder profiles

	Humanitarian actors	Security actors	Stabilisation actors	Peacebuilding actors	Development actors	Diplomatic actors
Interests	Provide basic needs and protection to civilians in immediate danger from natural or man-made disasters.	Stop physical violence by employing force.	Reduce insecurity to levels that permit emergence of the initial conditions for lasting peace.	Reduce and ultimately end and prevent future violence by transforming the social, political and economic causes of conflict.	Provide services that build healthier, more prosperous societies able to refrain from violence in the future.	Realisation of foreign policy aims.
Organizational approaches	Uphold principled political impartiality and adhere to international humanitarian law (IHL); deliver aid to any and all conflict parties in need.	Engage violent actors.	Provide formal governance and social services to convince neglected and contested communities to refrain from violence.	Understand and address social and political drivers and triggers of violence; adopt a relational approach; aim to meet people’s needs in each specific context.	Provide long-term social and economic services, once hostilities have ended, to support enduring stability and prosperity.	Attempt to influence the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures.

¹¹ The Development Assistance Committee of the OECD recently drafted a set of recommendations that begin to address some of these challenges. See OECD-DAC (2020), ‘DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus’.

	Humanitarian actors	Security actors	Stabilisation actors	Peacebuilding actors	Development actors	Diplomatic actors
Core capacities (not an exhaustive list)	Provide food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance for the benefit of affected people, and facilitate their return to normal lives and livelihoods.	Military force; policing; civilian protection; demining; border patrols; disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration (DDR); counter-terror; counter-narcotics, etc. In highly unstable areas, security forces are often the only actors able to access contested communities.	Counter-terror operations; security sector reform; training and equipment; governance support; State institution building; electoral assistance; service delivery; infrastructure projects.	Mediation support; conflict and context analysis; relationship building; community led problem definition and response; conflict sensitivity; human rights compliance; gender and youth inclusion; justice and security sector reform; DDR.	A raft of programmes and infrastructure projects, inter alia in education, health, livelihoods, gender, wider social inclusion, democratic literacy, and basic governance services.	Track one negotiations; ODA mobilisation; sanctions; international political coalition building; national policy development; multilateral liaison.

Yet as the above actors try to reduce conflict in their own ways, each can sometimes undermine others and in turn worsen the problems they hope to solve. A humanitarian aid organization might distribute food in a way that reinforces conflict between two groups that peacebuilders were mediating between; security forces might disproportionately target one ethnic group, undermining the State-building efforts of stabilisation actors; and diplomats might help broker trade agreements that undermine the initiatives of development actors to build local

economies. It is difficult enough for these actors to simply track each other's activities and priorities; ensuring that they complement one another is even harder.

Even if coordination between the various fields trying to respond to conflict were better, the number and diversity of donors funding them is daunting. The table below describes how key donors provide stabilisation support, bilaterally and through multilateral institutions, to countries mired in conflict.

3.2 National actors

	Offices and programmes	Purpose	Annual budget	Programmatic specificities
Canada	Peace and Stabilisation Operations Program (PSOP).	PSOP supports conflict prevention, dialogue, mediation, stabilisation, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery.	USD 150M, including USD 117.8M for grant and contribution agreements. ¹²	Thematic focus on support for women. Geographic focus on East Africa, the Sahel, Southeast Asia, Colombia.
Denmark	Peace and Stabilisation Fund. Peace and Stabilisation Response: 51 long-term advisors are spread across Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Niger, Mali, Ukraine, Georgia.	To address challenges at the nexus of security and development.	USD 76M in 2020 (DKK 500M). ¹³	Emphasis on mine clearing and restoration of basic services to allow the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to liberated areas in Syria and Iraq.
France	Within the Crisis and Support Centre (CDCS), a new Stabilisation Department supports democratic governance and civil society in crises that affect functioning of the government. Post-crisis Unit (French Development Agency).	CDCS handles crises that threaten the safety of French nationals abroad. It has three objectives: to re-establish security and the State's core functions; to relaunch the local economy and strengthen civil society; to lay the foundations of a long-term reconstruction and development process. ¹⁴	EUR 126M in 2020, increased from EUR 92M in 2019. ¹⁵	24/7 global monitoring and early warning analysis. Between 2008 and 2015, CDCS spent EUR 100M just on humanitarian aid. The annual budget spent on humanitarian aid is poised to increase from EUR 150M in 2018 to EUR 500M in 2022. ¹⁶

¹² <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/audits-verification/2020/psop.aspx?lang=eng>.

¹³ https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/aarsrapporter/samtaenkning/-fsf-aarsrapport-2020_english-.pdf, p. 4.

¹⁴ <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/the-crisis-and-support-centre/stabilizing-post-crisis-countries/>.

¹⁵ https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/rapport-cdcs-2020-online_version_finale_cle8841ef.pdf, p. 18.

¹⁶ <https://defishumanitaires.com/en/2021/02/04/exclusive-interview-with-eric-chevallier-director-of-the-crisis-and-support-center-of-the-ministry-of-europe-and-foreign-affairs/>.

	Offices and programmes	Purpose	Annual budget	Programmatic specificities
Germany	Federal Foreign Office (FFO), Directorate-General for Humanitarian Assistance, Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation and Post-Conflict Reconstruction. Within the Directorate-General, the Centre for International Peace Operations (ZIF) maintains a pool of 150 civilian experts to support peace globally.	<p>The mandate includes policy, budget planning and personnel, peace-building, evaluation, humanitarian assistance, early detection, strategy, and conflict analysis.</p> <p>The purpose of the Crisis Prevention Unit is not only to manage severe crises, but to prevent them.</p>	<p>Around half the total budget of the FFO (EUR 3.49bn) was allocated to efforts to safeguard peace and stability in 2021.</p> <p>The 2021 budget for crisis prevention and stabilisation was EUR 434M.¹⁷</p> <p>The 2021 budget for BMZ's efforts to tackle "root causes of displacement, stabilising host regions, and supporting refugees" was EUR 475M.</p> <p>The 2019-2020-2021 budget for the Civil Peace Service (CPS) was EUR 55M.¹⁸</p> <p>Germany spent USD 28.4bn on all forms of official development assistance (ODA) in 2020.¹⁹</p>	<p>Most programmes focus on fragile and conflict-affected countries.</p> <p>BMZ frames its development efforts as "fighting the root causes of displacement".²⁰</p> <p>Because BMZ's work is not politically oriented, even its programmes in conflict-affected environments generally focus on traditional development rather than stabilisation.</p> <p>Humanitarian assistance now accounts for a third of the Federal Foreign Office's budget, making Germany the second largest donor in the world.</p>
	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Stabilisation Platform, Advisory Structure to the FFO by GIZ.	<p>The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) funds the Civil Peace Service (CPS), a mix of government and civil society partners that support local partner organizations in peace-building, civilian conflict resolution, and the transformation of violent conflicts.</p> <p>The Stabilisation Platform advises the FFO on stabilisation strategies, operationalisation and programming, and provides context specific analysis.</p>		
Netherlands	Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH)	DSH supports humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, and promotes peace and security, rule of law, and good governance, before, during, and after crisis situations.	Its budget in 2020 was EUR 370M. ²¹	<p>Together with Germany, since 2010 DSH has organized the Common Effort Community, a coalition of more than 50 organizations dedicated to an integrated approach.</p> <p>A three-year focus on the Sahel started in 2019.²²</p>

¹⁷ <https://wien-io.diplo.de/iow-en/foreign-policy/foreignpolicy>.

¹⁸ <https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/en/about-us/facts-and-figures>.

¹⁹ <https://donortracker.org/country/germany>.

²⁰ <https://donortracker.org/country/germany>.

²¹ https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/binaries/iob-evaluatie-eng/documents/terms-of-reference/2020/10/21/evaluation-humanitarian-assistance/Terms_of_Reference_Humanitarian_Assistance_202010.pdf, p. 13.

²² <https://www.common-effort.org/our-history>.

	Offices and programmes	Purpose	Annual budget	Programmatic specificities
United Kingdom	Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF).	The stated objective of the Integrated Review is to reduce the frequency and intensity of conflict and instability, alleviate suffering, and minimise opportunities for State and non-State actors to undermine international security.	GBP 874M in 2021-2022 (GBP 337M in ODA funding). ²³	The top three ODA recipients in 2020 were Ethiopia (GBP 254M), Nigeria (GBP 241M), and Somalia (GBP 232M). ²⁴
	Office for Conflict, Stability and Mediation (OCSM).		Before it merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) spent half its budget in fragile and conflict-affected States.	
United States	Department of Defense (DOD) / Stability and Humanitarian Affairs (SHA) Office.	The SHA writes policy on how U.S. forces operate in conflict-affected environments.	CSO: USD 15M.	DOD recently initiated a policy allowing civilian organizations to deploy officials alongside U.S. military forces to implement stabilisation programmes. Most funding for U.S. stabilisation efforts tends to originate from the corresponding USAID Country Desk.
	U.S. State Department Bureau for Conflict and Stabilisation Operations (CSO).	CSO uses data-driven analysis and deployment of Stabilisation Advisors to anticipate, prevent, and respond to violent conflicts undermining U.S. national interests.	CPS: USD 112M. The U.S. contributed USD 1.46bn to UN peacekeeping and stabilisation operations in 2021. ²⁵	
	USAID Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilisation (CPS). USAID hosts the Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention, the Office of Civilian-Military Cooperation, and the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI).	CPS prevents conflict, addresses fragility, and responds to global crises. OTI runs programmes that target political crises, prevent and mitigate conflict, and address stabilisation needs in countries critical to U.S. foreign policy.		

²³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/26085/default>.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2020/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2020>.

²⁵ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10597>, p. 2.

3.3 Multilateral actors

	Programme title	Purpose	Annual budget	Programme specificities
African Union	AU Peace and Security Council	The Council provides conflict prevention and early warning, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction, and defence and security and peace support operations. It oversees the African Union Peace Fund.	Of its total budget of USD 647.3M in 2020, the AU spent USD 273.1M on peace support operations. ²⁶ 38% of the 2020 AU budget was contributed by Member States, 61% by partners.	The Council staffs a 24-hour situation room as well as regional observation and monitoring centres. It has the authority to deploy an African Standby Force and staff formal multilateral missions, such as AMISOM or UNAMID.
	ECOWAS Standby Force.	ECOWAS staffs peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions.	Expenditure for the whole region in 2022 was some USD 553M (393,612,400 Units of Account). ²⁷	Operational prevention: early warning, mediation, conciliation, preventive diplomacy, and deployment.
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework.	The prevention framework helps ECOWAS to address and prevent conflicts, operationally and structurally.	The ECOWAS Peace Fund directs resources to prevention and early warning; humanitarian assistance; and peace support operations.	Structural prevention: elements of peacebuilding, such as the promotion of political and institutional governance, and socio-economic development.

²⁶ <https://au.int/en/articles/african-union-sustainable-funding-strategy-gains-momentum>.

²⁷ <https://parl.ecowas.int/ecowas-budgets-393612400-ua-for-the-region-in-2022/>.

Programme title	Purpose	Annual budget	Programme specificities
Integrated Approach to Security and Peace (EEAS/ISP).	Research, conflict prevention, mediation, stabilisation, and strategic and integrated planning for civilian-military missions.	Between 2014 and 2021, the EU allocated EUR 2.3bn to IcSP.	In 2016, the EU updated its global strategy for reducing violent conflict. It now focuses on prevention. The new 'integrated approach' is: multi-phased; multi-dimensional; multi-level; and multilateral.
Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (EC/FPI/IcSP).	IcSP foresees short-term, immediate crisis response and long-term projects. It assists conflict prevention, peacebuilding and crisis preparedness (managed by FPI); or addresses global, transnational threats and emerging threats to international security (managed by the Resilience, Peace and Security Unit).	The total committed to IcSP in 2019 was EUR 366.2M. ²⁸	IcSP funding is not tied to ODA eligibility requirements. It therefore has flexibility to fund interventions related to climate change, counter-terrorism, organized crime, and actions that are not specific to a particular country.
Resilience, Peace and Security Unit (EC/INTPA).		ECHO gave EUR 2.4bn to 80 countries in 2019. Of this, seven Sahel countries received EUR 188M.	
European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (EC/ECHO).	ECHO is Europe's main humanitarian aid office.	For the period 2021 to 2027, NDICI has a budget of EUR 79.5bn. ²⁹	
Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).	With its geographical, thematic and rapid response pillars, NDICI draws from most of the EU's external action instruments.	EPF's financial ceiling for the 2021-2027 period is EUR 5.692bn. Its annual ceiling varies: it spent EUR 420M in 2021, and its planned budget for 2027 is EUR 1.132bn. ³⁰	
European Peace Facility (EPF).	EPF is an off-budget instrument whose task is to facilitate the financing of operational actions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that have military or defence implications. It has two pillars: Operations, and Assistance Measures.		
Strategic Compass	The Strategic Compass will be submitted for endorsement by the European Council in March 2022. It will be structured around four thematic baskets: crisis management; defence capabilities; resilience; and partnerships. Its aim is to provide an actionable framework for developing a shared vision for EU security and defence policy. Of particular relevance to stabilisation work is its 'crisis management' basket.		

28 https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/about_the_european_commission/eu_budget/db_2021_programme_statement_instrument_contributing_to_stability_and_peace.pdf, p. 2.

29 https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/global-europe-neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument_en.

30 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>.

3.4 The United Nations

Traditionally, UN peacekeeping missions have sought to solidify and enforce peace agreements between warring parties. When a tenuous peace takes shape, the parties invite peacekeeping missions to act as a mutual deterrent, restraining all the parties from resuming violence. Since the end of the Cold War, however, these missions have increasingly intervened in active conflicts in which peacekeepers are given the far harder task of building peace in the first place.

This has led to more ‘robust’ mandates, which give missions the authority, personnel, and resources to actively reduce conflict. Specifically, they entitle missions to use force not only in self-defence but also to protect civilians, thereby empowering peacekeepers to become more assertive without necessarily taking sides. Between 2000 and 2019, 88% of UN mission mandates authorised “all means necessary”

to reduce violence, and 81% have instructed missions to protect civilians.³¹ These missions essentially set out to act as armed but impartial referees that are equally tough on the government that invited them and on other combatants that may not have. In theory, this impartiality is what distinguishes an armed UN intervention from an armed intervention by a State or coalition that explicitly chooses sides.

More recently, the UN has taken steps to go beyond traditional peacekeeping missions by providing support for initiatives such as the Funding Facility for Stabilisation in areas affected by ISIS conflict in Iraq,³² and the Regional Stabilisation Facility for Lake Chad.³³ Unlike traditional peacekeeping missions, these facilities focus on rehabilitating public infrastructure and providing essential services to stabilise communities in conflict areas.

3.4.1 Stabilisation missions often sacrifice impartiality

The UN has come to appreciate that reducing violence in these environments requires not just deterrence but action to address the underlying causes of violence. In civil wars, root causes can often be traced to central government, whose poor performance creates legitimacy deficits.³⁴ Consequently, UN peacekeeping missions increasingly devote considerable resources to addressing government deficiencies. This material support is not based on loyalty to the host nation government, as the UN wants to maintain an even-handed approach. Instead, the UN offers this support because it correctly believes that conflicts cannot be adequately addressed in the absence of sound governance, no matter what else peace may require.

Unfortunately, UN involvement in governance reform can undermine perceptions of its impartiality.

Recent mission mandates explicitly require the UN to help struggling and semi-legitimate governments to exert control and influence over territory and populations contested by non-State actors. Rather than impartially cracking down on perpetrators of violence equally, such stabilisation missions are more often operational partners of the State, helping to extend its presence, target its enemies, rebuild its security forces, and deliver its social services. On the ground in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR), peacekeeping missions variously support counter-terrorism missions, finance host nation military checkpoints, conduct joint patrols with State armed forces, and, in accordance with their mandates, are tasked to use all necessary measures to directly target or ‘neutralise’ armed groups that challenge the government’s authority.^{35, 36, 37}

31 Hultman, L., Kathman, J. D., Shannon, M. (2019), *Peacekeeping in the Midst of War*, Oxford University Press, pp. 37-38.

32 <https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/all-projects/funding-facility-for-stabilization.html>

33 <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/LakeChad-RegionalStabilizationFacility.html>

34 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00020184.2020.1724767>.

35 <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/why-cuts-to-un-troops-in-congo-could-be-good-thing.html>.

36 Gilder, A. (2021), ‘Human Security and the Stabilization Mandate of MINUSCA’, *International Peacekeeping*, 28:2, 200-231, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2020.1733423.

37 Karlsrud, J. (2015), ‘The UN at war: examining the consequences of peace-enforcement mandates for the UN peacekeeping operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali’, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:1, 40-54, DOI:

As a result, when struggling governments harm the population by neglect or predation, or govern exclusively, UN missions can unwillingly become, or can be perceived to have become, complicit in their behaviour.³⁸ This can cause missions to be the target of attacks and eventually to become (or be seen to become) another party to the conflict. This risk, inherent to most stabilisation efforts, originates from the idea that the goal is to help central governments extend their authority in contested areas. It is a reading that reduces stabilisation missions to something of a race: donors must reform a government faster than their association with that government

sours their own reputation. It is a race that few missions have won.

The problem described above is especially apparent in the number of peacekeepers routinely targeted and killed in the course of three UN ‘stabilisation’ missions: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA); the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); and the UN Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).³⁹ (See the table below.)

Current UN stabilisation missions at a glance⁴⁰

	MINUSMA (Mali)	MONUSCO (DRC)	MINUSCA (CAR)
Established	2013	2010 ⁴¹	2014
Personnel	15,207	16,537	14,293
Budget	USD 1.2bn in 2019/20, double the 2013 budget.	USD 1.1bn, after steady decreases since 2013, when the budget was USD 1.45bn.	USD 976M, fluctuating very little since 2015.
Distinctive Characteristics	<p>The mission focused initially on the north of the country.</p> <p>By 2018, it had expanded to central Mali where security had steadily deteriorated.</p> <p>Numerous armed actors and stabilisation stakeholders are engaged.</p> <p>The situation is complicated by porous borders and a proliferation of transnational threats.</p>	<p>The mission focuses heavily on the east of the country.</p> <p>An expeditionary ‘Force Intervention Brigade’ targets armed groups.</p> <p>The mission pioneered measures to protect civilians.</p>	<p>Has the most complex mandate of any peacekeeping mission.</p> <p>Interventions tend to be more political than military.</p> <p>Efforts to protect civilians have a heavy policing component; UN police have authority to arrest and detain.</p>

10.1080/01436597.2015.976016.

38 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/1/18/un-peacekeepers-in-the-drc-no-longer-trusted-to-protect>; https://justfuturealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JF_Policy-Paper-Mali_SIPRICORDAID.pdf.

39 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>.

40 Sources: UN Department of Peacekeeping, ‘Where We Operate’, at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate>; Novosseloff, A. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in the DRC/MONUC–MONUSCO’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network; van der Lijn, J. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network; Howard, L. M. et al (2020), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic/MINUSCA’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, p. 55.

41 A previous UN mission to the DRC, MONUC, started in 1999. It was overhauled and given a new stabilisation mandate in 2010.

	MINUSMA (Mali)	MONUSCO (DRC)	MINUSCA (CAR)
Key Challenges	<p>Distinguishing between the different kinds of active armed groups, including terrorist armed groups; crafting coherent criteria for targeting them.</p> <p>Expanding geographic coverage without conceding newly retaken territory to armed groups.</p> <p>Deciding how much the mission should support counter-terrorism actions by other actors.</p>	<p>Protecting civilians with ever-dwindling resources in especially rough terrain.</p> <p>Convincing the government of the mission's value and of the need to implement government reforms.</p> <p>Managing the drawdown of the mission effectively.</p>	<p>How to juggle a large and growing number of tasks with no additional resources.</p> <p>Dealing with illicit economies and external influences that drive conflict.</p>

3.4.2 Strategic ambiguity

Stabilisation is such a significant departure from traditional UN peacekeeping that one would expect the shift to have been accompanied by extensive deliberation and reflection about the UN's role, doctrine, strategy, and resources.⁴² Instead, it appears the UN's adoption of a stabilisation mindset was perhaps due more to mission creep than a deliberate response to new conflict threats, according to Cedric de Coning. Omitting a doctrinal review process allowed UN and donor officials "to start using a new concept ... without having to say so explicitly," he

argued.⁴³ Bypassing this discussion had certain conveniences: a debate that does not occur cannot be opposed. Yet it is not too late. The Security Council and Member States can still have these discussions, as well as identify and remedy the significant misalignments in mandate, methods, and resources for these missions. If they do not, donors will remain perpetually frustrated by a type of mission that consistently appears to under-deliver, causing continued suffering to people affected by instability.

3.4.3 Managing donor expectations

Donors tend to expect stabilisation missions to accomplish too much, too soon; and often seem to conflate the difficult work of stabilisation with the less challenging work of traditional peacekeeping. This can lead to a number of problems.

First, while UN stabilisation missions certainly need more funding and staff than traditional peacekeeping missions, Member States still vastly underesti-

mate the amount of time, training, contextual and thematic expertise, civilian staff, and military support that missions of this complexity require. This has grave consequences. For example, because the DRC still has no budget for training its police, 80% of the country's officers are entirely untrained. In central and northern Mali, 69% of civil servants do not show up for work. In CAR, the State security apparatus is so minimal that the UN mission was au-

⁴² The closest the UN came to such an exploration was the 2000 'Brahimi Report', which proposed reforms to address the organization's failure to protect civilians during peacekeeping missions in the 1990s, in Rwanda and Bosnia in particular. This report was the genesis for the move to more robust mandates, but did not sufficiently tackle the implications of appearing to favour the government and status quo in environments saturated by legitimate grievances. UN General Assembly, 'Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects', A/55/305-S/2000/809, 21 August 2000.

⁴³ de Coning, C. (2018), 'Is Stabilisation the New Normal? Implications of Stabilisation Mandates for the Use of Force in UN Peace Operations', in Nadin, P. (ed), *Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping*, Routledge.

thorised “to arrest and detain in order to maintain basic law and order”, a far more fundamental governance task than reducing political violence.⁴⁴

These missions also have to work around major development deficits as they attempt to build stability. For example, two thirds of Malians are illiterate; half of DRC’s population is younger than 16; and CAR has the third worst infant mortality rate and the fifth worst maternal mortality rate in the world.⁴⁵ In these environments, fifteen thousand peacekeepers and a few hundred civilian staff will not be able to end violence, build sufficient government capacity to sustain gains, or create conditions in which a UN mission will no longer be needed. This misalignment between the ambition of stabilisation mandates, and their resources and operating environments, makes disappointment among stakeholders likely.

Second, as detailed above, donors tend to assume that the impartiality of UN missions is widely accepted on the ground. Relying on this assumption, when UN casualties spike or security worsens, their response is often to expand a mission or strengthen its mandate. These decisions can lean the mission towards the host government even more, nurturing fresh grievances even as the mission tries to address older ones. Like the tendency to be drawn ever deeper into a conflict, ‘policy entrapment’⁴⁶ is an almost universal experience for donor-led stabilisation missions, and can have serious repercussions if donors do not recognise that they have become another party to the conflict.

Third, once underway, a mission’s mandate, methods, and budget continue to change, but often do so independently of one another. For example, MINUSMA’s 2014 mandate was limited to restoring State authority in the north of Mali; but in 2018, after securi-

ty deteriorated in the far more populous and diverse centre of the country, its mandate was significantly expanded to include restoration of State authority in central Mali as well. This expansion essentially tripled the number of civilians the mission had to protect, required the mission to train and equip for a new context and terrain, and demanded new surveillance and intelligence capabilities. Yet its budget increased by 7%.⁴⁷

In CAR, MINUSCA’s mandate was similarly expanded in 2019, when the mission was tasked to support a recent peace agreement, prepare the country for elections, and create “the political, security and institutional conditions conducive to sustainably reducing the presence of ... armed groups”. In essence, the mission was suddenly expected to address nearly all of the country’s destabilising factors, at a time when three quarters of its territory was controlled by non-State armed groups. The mission’s budget remained the same.⁴⁸

Similar alignment problems occur when scaling down. Budget cuts to MONUSCO in DRC in 2017 were not linked to a change in mandate or conditions on the ground, and the mission was forced to improvise in order to protect a hundred million people spread across a country the size of continental Europe. The mission artfully shifted its approach from “protection through presence” to “protection through projection”. In other words, the intention was to compensate for being present in fewer places by deploying more quickly to those places when necessary. However, budget cuts made a sensible plan impractical, because it relied on air assets to traverse DRC’s rough terrain and the cost became unsustainable. The result was that fewer civilians were protected and the population felt their situation had become less secure and more unstable.⁴⁹

44 Novosseloff, A. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in the DRC/MONUC-MONUSCO’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, p. 97; van der Lijn, J. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, p. 69; UN Security Council, Resolution 2499 (2019), cited in Howard, L. M. et al (2020), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic/MINUSCA’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, p. 55.

45 CIA, World Factbook, accessed December 2020.

46 Plank, F., Bergmann, J. (2021), ‘The European Union as a Security Actor in the Sahel: Policy Entrapment in EU Foreign Policy’, *European Review of International Studies*, at https://brill.com/view/journals/eris/8/3/article-p382_382.xml.

47 van der Lijn J. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, pp. 56, 111.

48 Howard, L. M. et al (2020), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic/MINUSCA’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, pp. 56, 58.

49 Center for Civilians in Conflict (2018), ‘Protection with Less Presence: How the Peacekeeping Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo is Attempting to Deliver Protection with Fewer Resources’; Novosseloff, A. et al (2019),

In cases like these, a disconnect is apparent between mission needs and decisions of the Security Council, suggesting that Members of the Security Council may be unaware of the challenges a given mission faces or may be influenced by domestic priorities. Donors are sometimes eager to reduce peacekeeping budgets because it suits another agenda, not because a mission's objective needs to evolve to deal with specific inefficiencies, mandate revisions, or changing conflict dynamics. While cost alone is not a reliable indicator of quality, the frequent misalign-

ment between mandate and resources raises important questions about how to finance peace and stability efforts most appropriately in conflict settings.

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3.4.4 Reconciling contradictions

Leaving expectations aside, it is sensible to question whether and how the activities of stabilisation missions in general lead to broader stability. Their most impressive victories have been to prevent mass killings and modestly improve government capacity. Both of these effects are highly important, but perhaps insufficient to actually stabilise fragile environments.⁵⁰ Not only are stabilisation missions often unable to create a sustainable, positive peace that outlasts their presence, but these missions find it difficult to create peace while they are still present on the ground.

However, it would be facile to dismiss peacekeeping missions as ineffective. Considerable qualitative and quantitative research has shown that “larger deployments of armed [UN] troops are associated with reductions in both battlefield violence and one-sided violence against civilians”.⁵¹ If that is the case, is the missing link to be found after this, in the relationship between reduction of violence and the construction of social and political conditions that support peace and stability? Unable to answer this question definitively, some donors have wondered whether merely reducing violence is sufficient to make missions worthwhile, especially in situations where long-term peace remains unlikely and conflicts may re-ignite. Many others are not convinced

by the argument that spending billions of dollars simply to reduce near-term violence is a defensible victory; moreover, despite extraordinary budgets, several stabilisation missions have struggled to meet even this lower bar.

At the same time, not all conflicts and stabilisation requirements are equal. Some missions, such as Haiti, were instructed to address violence that was predominantly criminal rather than ethnic, religious, or territorial; the job of peacekeepers was more to smooth out low-level anarchy than dismantle organized political violence.⁵² Because criminal gangs were not very resilient, by targeting their leadership MINUSTAH could weaken the threat they posed, enable nascent State institutions to protect civilians better, and create space in which MINUSTAH could help to strengthen courts, prisons, the police force, and other institutions.

Unfortunately, these variables present very differently in places such as Mali, CAR, and DRC, making the situations in all three more challenging. Looking for a universally applicable ‘model’ for stabilisation is challenging. Some conflicts may permit only partial victories, at least in the short to medium term, and expectations should be adjusted accordingly if it is determined that a mission is worth

¹ ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in the DRC/MONUC-MONUSCO’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁰ Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) (2016), ‘[Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali \(MINUSMA\)](#)’.

⁵¹ Hultman, L., Kathman, J. D., Shannon, M. (2019), *Peacekeeping in the Midst of War*, Oxford University Press, pp. 20, 85-101, 115-131; Hegre, H., Hultman, L., Nygård, H. M. (2017), ‘Peacekeeping Works: Evaluating the Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations’, *Conflict Trends*, 6.

⁵² Le Chevallier, G. (2011), ‘The MINUSTAH Experience’, in Heine, J. and Thompson, A. S. (eds), ‘Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and Beyond’, United Nations University.

pursuing. Well-managed expectation is simply not possible, however, in the absence of a sober internal exploration that enables UN peacekeeping missions to reconcile their contradictions - between ro-

bust support and impartiality, between realistic and unachievable donor expectations, between the strategy's ambition and its budget, and between the ability to intervene and the ability to exit.

3.4.5 Reform efforts

UN peace operations (writ large) have undergone significant reforms that have affected both stabilisation missions and less robust peacekeeping operations. This has been especially true since 2018, when the UN launched its Action for Peacekeeping initiative, to build momentum for a wave of improvements to UN peace operations.⁵³

For UN stakeholders, coordination and planning have been a consistent challenge, which has grown as peacekeeping environments have become more complex and dangerous. To address this, the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) was developed in 2018 and fully integrated into the 13 ongoing UN peacekeeping missions at the end of 2021. A form of online dashboard, CPAS is a decision-making tool that “allows missions to more systematically assess their operating environment, identify what influence they aim to have ... assess progress towards these goals using data and analysis, [and] formulate recommendations to decision-makers and mission leadership to enhance mandate implementation”.⁵⁴

Though it may be too early to evaluate the impact of CPAS on UN peacekeeping operations, the tool is encouraging in that it is explicitly designed to address several of the stabilisation challenges covered in this report, including: poor coordination between stakeholders (Section 5.2.1); the dangers of

programming in information vacuums (Section 6.1); and insufficient monitoring and evaluation (Section 6.3). However, by virtue of its extraordinary ambition, CPAS runs the risk of achieving little by trying to do too much.

Some reforms are designed to enable more thoughtful decision-making, while others are more fundamental. One ongoing challenge relates to the behaviour of mission peacekeepers, a small percentage of whom have been accused of abuse. In 2019, 80 allegations were made against UN peacekeepers. Though most peacekeepers serve honourably, allegations of abuse can cripple a mission's reputation, especially when they appear to reflect a pattern. For example, 70% of the 2019 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers concerned the missions in CAR and DRC.⁵⁵

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The UN has put in place a number of countermeasures to reduce individual abuses, including ‘clear check’, a blacklist system that ensures suspected abusers are ineligible to join future peacekeeping missions.⁵⁶ More broadly, UN missions have begun conducting ‘Force Commander’s Unit Evaluations’. These are regular assessments of the mili-

53 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, ‘Action for Peacekeeping’, at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/action-for-peacekeeping-a4p>.

54 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, ‘The Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System’, at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/cpas>.

55 Wheeler, S. (2020), ‘UN Peacekeeping has a Sexual Abuse Problem’, Human Rights Watch, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/11/un-peacekeeping-has-sexual-abuse-problem#>; United Nations (2020), ‘Updated information on all allegations, as reported to peacekeeping and special political missions’, at https://conduct.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/additional_information_to_a-74-705_-_data_update_2010-2018.pdf; UN General Assembly, ‘Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse’, 17 February 2020, pp. 14-16, at https://conduct.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a_74-705_e_special_measures_for_protection_from_sexual_exploitation_and_abuse.pdf; Human Rights Watch (2016), ‘Central African Republic: Murder by Peacekeepers Discovery of Mass Grave Provides New Evidence’, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/07/central-african-republic-murder-peacekeepers>.

56 UN General Assembly (2020), ‘Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse’, p. 10. At https://conduct.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a_74-705_e_special_measures_for_protection_from_sexual_exploitation_and_abuse.pdf.

tary units that contribute to a mission, in part to root out conduct issues that may be systemic.⁵⁷ Similarly, the ‘Formed Police Units’ (FPU) attached to some of the UN’s most dangerous peacekeeping missions are evaluated each quarter, against standard performance criteria (such as operational readiness and command and control) but also against standards of ‘conduct and discipline’. One of the evaluators’ questions reads: “What steps are FPU commanding officers taking to prevent and address misconduct by their subordinates, including to ensure that risks

of sexual exploitation and abuse are identified and prevented?” These assessments seek to enable “informed decision-making, targeted performance improvements and remedial measures where needed”.⁵⁸

These reforms are clearly a priority for the UN. Time will tell how successfully they reduce abuse and misbehaviour and increase local trust in UN missions – without which the prospects of working with populations to understand their needs and contribute to peace and stability may be hampered.



57 de Coning, C. (2020), ‘Performance of Peace Operations – Background Paper’, Challenges Forum.

58 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (2019), ‘Assessment and Evaluation of Formed Police Unit Performance: Standard Operating Procedure’, at [https://pcrs.un.org/Lists/Resources/06-%20Peacekeeping%20Performance/Police%20Performance/20200604%20-%20%20SOP%20on%20FPU%20Performance%20-%20Amended%20\(Final\).pdf](https://pcrs.un.org/Lists/Resources/06-%20Peacekeeping%20Performance/Police%20Performance/20200604%20-%20%20SOP%20on%20FPU%20Performance%20-%20Amended%20(Final).pdf).



4. Strategic lessons: How stabilisation efforts are conceived and structured

The majority of challenges that stabilisation practitioners experience on the ground can be traced to conceptual flaws in the enterprise's design and structure. Like dominoes falling, every poor high-level decision regarding an effort's scope,

timelines, geographic priorities, lines of authority, division of labour, and theory of change constrains stakeholders' ability to carry out good work on the ground.

4.1 Conceiving the effort

4.1.1 The real value of an exit strategy is in making a stronger entrance

The importance of identifying and publicly announcing an exit strategy is widely recognised. Usually, because building central government capacity is often assumed to be the purpose of stabilisation, exit criteria tend to focus on the capacity of government institutions and security forces to manage the country's conflict on their own. Recent exit criteria have tended to focus on meeting pre-defined, specific peace and governance conditions; yet in practice, they have been time-bound or motivated by political concerns. This has meant that exits from stabilisation efforts have been almost entirely detached from achievement of long-term and sustainable stability.

The real benefit of developing a clear exit strategy is that it can be used as a tool to ensure that these efforts are well designed to meet the needs of people for peace and stability from the start. This approach is far more inclusive, and politically smarter, than merely extending government capacity. If they are obliged to develop a theory of change that makes exit possible, stabilisation planners are forced to ask: "What knowledge, skills, and services do contested communities need to address their grievances peacefully?" Adequately answering that question requires a deep understanding of the country and the communities in question. It opens the way to

adopting qualitative activities and approaches that address local conflict dynamics.

Indeed, it is critical to drill down and understand grievances at the community level in order to establish how the central government might successfully address them. Why did people support violence in the first place? What is the community's historical relationship with the State? What incentives would bring a community back into the State's orbit? How can the State be assisted to provide them? Such probing questions are critical, not just to understand what members of a community want but to understand what is likely to convince them to stop supporting violence and contribute to stability.

In sum, an exit strategy should address the following before any funds are spent on stabilisation:

1. What are the population's broader historical expectations and grievances? Who has attempted to address them? How did those attempts play out?
2. What should a granular analysis of grievances at the community level include? How should that analysis inform tailored programming

across the nexus of peacebuilding, security and development?

The product ought to be a road map towards the realisation of certain peace and stability conditions. Designing it is a complex endeavour undertaken at the start of a stabilisation process. Different regions

of the country are likely to require separate analyses, different theories of change, and unique peace conditions. But if they do this exercise, donors will be able to work towards an exit strategy that is supported by local communities, where much of the instability and contestation typically occur, not just by central government.

4.1.2 Stabilisation is the beginning of a long-term endeavour

Long before funds are disbursed for a stabilisation effort, several critical questions must be asked and answered. First among them is the timeline for the effort – a primary concern of donors. Political and operational constraints make this topic especially delicate. It takes many years, if not decades, to build or rebuild institutions that are able to govern inclusively, and to empower communities to peaceably resolve their own conflicts. If donors publicly commit to an open-ended mission, they can develop a plan that reflects a sober analysis of the problem they seek to address. However, their domestic constituencies typically lack the patience for a long-term effort in a fragile country, and concerns over re-election prospects, casualties, and ‘wasted’ funds mean that donors rarely undertake publicly to invest in a conflict-affected country for more than a few years at a time. Budgetary cycles and funding timeframes are also important inhibiting factors.

Unfortunately, simply operating in a country, even for two decades, is insufficient. Because it never made a long-term plan, the Coalition’s war in Afghanistan has famously been described as ‘20 one-year wars’ rather than one 20-year war. Indeed, by debating and renewing mandates every year, the UN

has made short time horizons a defining feature of its strategies. The critical component for success is not in-country presence but *predictability*, which enables all stabilisation stakeholders, from foreign ministers to programme managers, to strategise, align, and sequence interventions with confidence that diplomatic bandwidth and programme funding will continue to be available.

When timelines are compressed or unpredictable, it is also difficult to recruit, train, and deploy competent and experienced professionals to build government capacity in contested communities. It is nearly impossible to do so at scale. In such conditions, even with experienced staff, stabilisation programmes cannot succeed.

Rather than being tied to fixed dates, stabilisation planning timelines should be tied to realisation of qualitative peace conditions that take account of the specific context. Above all, short timelines create doubt on the ground in efforts where success eventually depends almost entirely on public confidence in a reimagined, peaceful future. No stabilisation effort run on a series of one-year mandates can hope to restore or construct a social contract.

4.1.3 Stabilise the most difficult places last

When developing a stabilisation strategy, donors may be tempted to assume that they should focus first on the most insecure parts of a country. Military officials are particularly likely to present a compelling argument that the best way to reduce a conflagration is to attack the flames directly. While this argument is intuitively persuasive and consistent with how military operations are resourced,

history has shown that this approach is not the best way to achieve stabilisation.⁵⁹ The better approach is to douse smaller, more manageable sparks, and prevent flames from spreading. An effort that prioritises the most violent areas first is likely to fail in those areas, to miss opportunities to build resilience in areas on the edge, and so fail to prevent violence from spreading. In Afghanistan and Mali, this worst-of-

59 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf#page=17>, p. 69.

both-worlds dynamic has been on full display.

Prioritising the most violent areas first is likely to fail in those areas and likely to miss opportunities to prevent violence from spreading.

Stabilisation resources in Afghanistan were concentrated in the most volatile parts of the country, the rural south and east. It was a nod towards military efficiency: by taking on the toughest fights, the U.S.-led Coalition assumed it would create a ‘cascading impact’ on the rest of the country, making it easier to stabilise. Instead, military forces got stuck in those tough battles, working with communities that had no faith in (or even exposure to) the formal government arrangements the Coalition was trying to instil. The approach neglected to consider sufficiently that stabilisation is an inherently political proposal: governments must demonstrate to contested communities the political, security, and economic merits of supporting their offer, in preference to the offer of non-State armed groups.

In Afghanistan, the communities most exposed to conflict needed to observe positive outcomes in neighbouring communities whose needs the government could meet – but this was not possible because the U.S. government invested the bulk of its resources in the most volatile parts of the country where it achieved little progress. The Coalition’s prospects would have improved had it first stabilised semi-secure areas—district capitals, for example—and then worked its way towards the most volatile parts of the country, accumulating successes that understandably sceptical community elders in those places could observe for themselves.

The story was the same in Mali. Filling a governance vacuum after 2012, religious political factions and a Tuareg rebellion engulfed the north. Donors poured resources into that area to extinguish the revolt head-on. These efforts produced a brief fall in violence and an increase in faith in government in the north, but the State’s failure to maintain physical security, meet human security needs, or address the political drivers of conflict meant that violence soon took hold again, restricting the government’s day-to-day physical control to a handful of larger northern towns. In 2020, the commander of all U.S. special operations forces in Africa acknowledged that jihadists had a “de facto safe haven in northern Mali”.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, as northern Mali took up an increasing number of troops and donor bandwidth, central Mali’s much larger and more diverse population was neglected, allowing the security situation to deteriorate there.⁶¹ UN peacekeepers in Mali were not authorised to deploy in central Mali until 2018, long after instability and violence began.⁶² Donors are now focusing on central Mali, perhaps once more neglecting the area that is most amenable to stabilisation – southern Mali, where most of the population live, which is still semi-secure. It is worrying that this pattern is likely to repeat as long as donors direct the bulk of their resources to the most dangerous areas of fragile countries they try to stabilise.

The lesson here is not to let the most dangerous areas worsen. Instead, it is to work toward those areas gradually, recognising that programming in the worst areas with insufficient local knowledge and monitoring and evaluation has a long history of backfiring. The temptation to chase fires should be resisted.

60 ‘Fighting a Spreading Insurgency’, *The Economist*, 11 July 2020.

61 International Crisis Group (2020), ‘[Reversing Central Mali’s Descent into Communal Violence](#)’.

62 van der Lijn, J. et al (2019), ‘Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali’, Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, pp. 53-54.

4.2 Structuring the effort

A strategy sets timelines and geographic priorities, designs exit plans, and proposes theories of change. Its execution falls to international and host nation officials on the ground. The structure of an effort

establishes lines of authority, divisions of labour, staffing patterns, and workflow – all of which require as much forethought and discipline as conceiving the strategy itself.

4.2.1 Clear lines of authority are hard to devise

The division of labour during a stabilisation effort has many trip wires. Larger coalitions are critical to keep a conflict on the list of donor priorities, but more voices can sometimes mean more noise, not more collaboration. As donor stabilisation doctrine has improved, planning has grown more complex. An example is the EU's Integrated Approach (see the table in Section 4.3), which includes multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level, and multilateral dimensions.

Each dimension may require different lines of authority, which may change individually, collectively, and unpredictably.⁶³ Even when they do not change, they are likely to be convoluted (in practice if not on paper). In Afghanistan, for instance, the U.S. led the international effort, which included troop and aid contributions from dozens of countries, including the UK, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Canada, Australia, and South Korea. Many countries were responsible for their own contiguous 'battle space' or Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These contingents operated semi-independently, often under 'national caveats' from their capitals that limited how they could operate. Among other restrictions, ca-

veats prevented some actors from conducting offensive operations or conducting missions at night. The length of tours of different nationalities ranged from four to nine months, with significant implications for what any official could accomplish. Coordination between battle spaces was often insufficient. For example, the U.S. and NATO countries usually used different IT systems for tracking intelligence and project information; even if they did not, differences in their approach made it far harder to track and compare progress in stabilising contested communities across regions.

Dividing up sectors, so that the UK was in charge of counter-narcotics, for example, was conceptually helpful; but constant integration was still necessary because drug interdiction and eradication policies needed to be aligned with efforts in the governance, agriculture, and economic growth sectors, which were all managed by different actors. The number of countries involved, differences in interest and in the resources that could be leveraged, and restrictions in what countries could do, meant that meaningful coordination was an immense challenge.

4.2.3 Genuine civilian-military coordination is critical to success

Lines of authority underpin management of an international coalition, and the issue of whether military or civilian officials have operational control is particularly important. Most stabilisation efforts recognise that civilian-military coordination is important. This is sometimes reflected in official parity between senior civilian and military officials up and down the command chain.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, donor ambassadors worked side by side with the international military commander. Host nation civilian and military officials were expected to mirror this model, which was replicated all the way down to brigade and sometimes battalion level. In practice, the imbalance in numbers prevented intent from becoming reality. In the U.S. case, for example, the budget of the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International

63 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf#page=17>, p. 12.

al Development (USAID) are not comparable to the budget of the U.S. military:⁶⁴ it followed that a brigade of 10,000 troops might have one State Department official at its headquarters, entirely dependent on the military for everything from food and housing to travel and communications. When a critical decision had to be made, the State official rarely had a genuine power of veto that could be compared to that of the military commander. These imbalances caused civilian officials to resemble advisors to the military, rather than partners.

Because stabilisation is a political endeavour, its implementation needs to be controlled by civilians skilled in such matters, taking military advice into account. Civilians should take the lead in determining not only when to initiate stabilisation programmes in a given area but, more importantly, whether that area should be prioritised to begin with.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, when State and USAID officials told their military counterparts that ‘cleared’ areas remained too dangerous to begin stabilisation programmes, military officials usually overruled them, often with poor results. Because stabilisation is a political endeavour, its implementation needs to be controlled by civilians skilled in such matters. Civilians should take the lead in determining, not only when to initiate stabilisation programmes in a given area but, more importantly, whether that area should be prioritised to begin with. In many fragile States, however, military officials tend to take decisions without meaningful consultation with their

civilian counterparts, even when the latter have greater proximity to populations and considerable expertise in stabilisation, development, and peacebuilding. The imbalance is just as common in host nation governments, where security-led approaches also frequently hinder political reconciliation processes.

Recognising the imbalance, in 2015 NATO noted that stabilisation “is primarily the responsibility of non-military actors, [so] the military contribution will generally enable or support other groups’ end-states”.⁶⁵ Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defense agreed in 2018 that, in future, it would support the Department of State and USAID, and would defer to civilian institutions when critical decisions were made in stabilisation efforts.⁶⁶ In similar terms, the 2019 UK Stabilisation Guide calls for “clear civilian direction and leadership”.⁶⁷ Despite being widely recognised, these norms nevertheless tend to be ignored because, when donors and missions prioritise and focus their resources in the most violent areas, the military will always take the lead by virtue of its combat expertise and mandate. For this reason, to improve stabilisation, it will be necessary to rethink civilian-military relationships operationally on the ground. Put differently, if a strategy sends everyone into a blaze, it will be firefighters, not social workers or peacebuilders, who find themselves in charge, whether they want to be or not.

If donors prioritise and focus their resources in the most violent areas, the military will always take the lead by virtue of its combat expertise and mandate.

4.2.3 Staffing of stabilisation efforts requires sophisticated planning

Each role in a stabilisation effort demands a unique skillset. When an effort is small, the right people can often be found. It is much more difficult when efforts scale up. When they do, staff unaccustomed to working in conflict zones are frequently pulled in

to deliver functions of which they have experience (such as ‘diplomacy’, ‘development’, or ‘military operations’) but which, in a conflict setting, may lack familiar boundaries, be unsettling, or filled with novel challenges.

64 See: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-department-of-state-and-u-s-agency-for-international-development-fy-2023-budget-request/>; <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2980014/the-department-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2023-defense-budget/#:~:text=The%20FY%202023%20DoD%20Budget,service%20members%20and%20their%20families.>

65 NATO (2015), ‘Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilisation and Reconstruction’, pp. 1-11.

66 U.S. Department of State (2018), ‘Stabilisation Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximising the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilise Conflict-Affected Areas’, p. 11.

67 UK Stabilisation Unit (2019), ‘The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policymakers and Practitioners’, p. 27.

For example, civilian-military integration requires diplomats and military officials to work side by side and understand the other's perspectives, interests, and biases (as well as their own). Development professionals must learn to accept (and some find it unacceptable) that their work cannot be detached from the achievement of security objectives. Monitoring and evaluation experts must be creative enough to measure progress without leaving their compounds. International and host nation soldiers, trained to fight, must quickly adapt to charming and winning over wary communities - even when the average soldier would be "hard-pressed to win the heart and mind of his mother-in-law", as Ambassador Karl Eikenberry once observed in Afghanistan.⁶⁸

In theory, effective pre-deployment training should resolve some of these challenges; but proper pre-deployment training rarely happens, for several reasons. First, if most civilian and military posts are not in war zones, most training will focus on non-conflict environments for reasons of efficiency. Second, most donor officials are reluctant to work in conflict zones. Because it is very difficult to demonstrate progress, those who want to 'do good' feel frustrated, and those who are ambitious have concerns about their performance evaluations and career. Such posts are often considered hardships that must be endured, rather than challenges that training can overcome.

Third, recurring failures make support for stabilisation efforts politically treacherous. Few officials want to request funding to properly plan and train for a stabilisation effort that may go badly, especially when they might face criticism for publicly supporting preparation in the first place. Sometimes, events will compel policymakers to decide that a stabilisation effort is necessary to meet a national security challenge. But domestic political cycles, financial cycles, or the urgency of perceived threats will often mean that insufficient time is allowed to estab-

lish training programmes for staff who, as a result, are often deployed unprepared and with little notice.

Once in country, steep learning curves and short tours mean that international civilian and military officials find their rhythm only as the end of their tour approaches. They are often lucky if they have two weeks to train their replacement before going home. Few donors have deep staffing reserves for conflict-affected situations, since assignments are usually voluntary. Many international officials and military advisors on conventional career tracks say that their staffing systems do not incentivise staff to take posts in conflict zones, which potentially harm an employee's career prospects. After two decades of war, the U.S. government can call on perhaps several hundred officials who are experienced and whose job is still focused on such environments, but most of these are unavailable on short notice and many are only paid while deployed.

Fragile contexts also tend to worsen bureaucratic gridlock among donors. Personnel systems cannot keep up with fast moving conflicts, and donors struggle to fit the right people in the right jobs at the right times. For example, it took more than a year to embed the first U.S. civilian stabilisation advisor with U.S. forces in Syria in 2017-18, to advise on the distribution of stabilisation funds in the fight against ISIS. In contrast, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq showed that red tape and obstacles can be removed when these efforts sit at the top of donor workflows. These conflicts created the opposite problem: donors were so desperate to get personnel into the country, regardless of their qualifications, that what is normally a bureaucratic logjam became a mudslide.

Personnel systems cannot compete with fast moving conflicts, so donors struggle to staff them.

68 Eikenberry, K. (2013), 'The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2013.

4.2.4 Sustainability requires compromises

Stabilisation requires close cooperation with host nation governments. Donor efforts to stabilise a country will only be effective if they focus on the needs of the people, and support the development of a functioning political system that can assume responsibility for governance and services. Even when short-term stabilisation is successful, the critical question remains: “Will it hold when donors step away?” The answer is usually disappointing because of the obstacles to sustainable assistance.

The sustainability of stabilisation efforts rests on two components: coordination of interests, and capacity building. In theory, coordination ensures that interventions are adapted to fit the culture, politics, education, and competing narratives of the population. Through coordination, donors become more aware of potential traps and errors and can more tactfully explore sensitive political and social issues, such as women’s rights. Coordination also helps host nation officials to understand donor constraints, through constant mutual review of strategic decisions and programme documents. Coordination makes clear which host nation ministries and organizations need more capacity and support if they are to take over day-to-day management of governance functions.

In practice, however, even with heavy donor involvement, advancing a stabilisation effort is often so onerous that it becomes difficult to imagine stepping back and offering less or a different kind of support. In this respect, coordination and capacity building can appear to be a zero sum game. For instance, it is difficult for donors to send a government official to a critical one-week training when the field staff they oversee are being attacked and require constant attention. Donors sometimes address this dilemma by embedding technical advisors in host nation ministries, security forces, and other organizations. This allows officials to stay on the job while learning from an expert who spends all day with them. This model, however, is resource intensive; donors cannot pay for every official to have a personal advisor. Advisors also sometimes end up doing much of the work of their host nation counterparts. After all, pursuing the firefighting metaphor, it is tempting for international advisors to put out today’s fire and hope to train more firefighters tomorrow.

Unfortunately, there is typically no shortage of fires, and it takes extraordinary discipline by all parties to prioritise capacity building over action. Local officials, civil society organizations, and stabilisation programme managers face the same challenge at operational level.

Pursuing the firefighting metaphor, it is tempting for international advisors to put out today’s fire themselves and hope to train more firefighters tomorrow.

Relationships at strategic level can also be fraught, which hurts coordination. Host nation officials often say that donors ignore their input into programme design and implementation, causing downstream problems for programmes. However, while they are not wrong, host nation officials often fail to appreciate the legal and political constraints faced by donors, attributing their behaviour to wilful disregard for their opinions. The truth is that both host and donor governments follow institutional routines, which are difficult to change or establish. A common risk is that donors shape host institutions to be ‘professional’ (in other words, ‘western’), but these function poorly in practice because their procedures are considered foreign, unwanted, overly-complicated, or inappropriate, and do not take hold. This kind of ‘isomorphic mimicry’ is ruinous for sustainability; it leads to hollow institutions that look the part but deliver little by way of effective services for their populations.

Corruption is another significant challenge to productive relationships. Some host nation officials make recommendations on the content or location of programmes that will evidently divert aid largesse to their patronage networks. This makes it difficult to trust the guidance they offer. In such cases, vetting processes become a key element of capacity building, particularly for roles that exercise financial responsibilities.

For host nation officials, structural disincentives may inhibit implementation of elements of stabilisation efforts. Some fragile governments are staffed by weak technocrats; others by people who bring considerable informal power to their roles in government, which may become a vehicle for such power.

er. The same can be said of donor governments, of course. But, if an aim of stabilisation is to improve the accountability and reach of the government with respect to contested communities, officials whose power depends on their informal networks are likely to undermine attempts to strengthen formal gov-

ernment institutions. For example, to address a local security concern, a deputy minister of interior may ask for help from an unsanctioned militia commander he knows instead of the local chief of police, or even obstruct State officials from carrying out their responsibilities.



5. Operational best practices: insights from stabilisation contexts

Stabilisation efforts face at least as many challenges and opportunities outside the host nation's capital as inside it. Critical decisions are made, and often improvised, at regional and programme level that determine whether stabilisation

interventions protect contested communities or put them in even greater danger. Decisions cover three areas: preparation, programming, and monitoring and evaluation.

5.1 Lack of preparation is the most common and consequential stabilisation oversight

It is critical to understand the political and social context and history of a conflict zone. Without this knowledge, ignorance is likely to hamstring work at every stage. Much of the local knowledge necessary for successful stabilisation should be acquired long before proper programming begins. Donors and partners need to acquire a detailed knowledge of sources of peace and conflict in contested communities that few people possess about their own home towns. Who are the power brokers in and out of government? What are the principal identity groups (in terms of sect, ethnicity, tribe, etc.)? How do lives vary across these different groups? Who conflicts with whom, about what? How have conflicts played out, recently and in the past? What are the experiences of women in conflict? Who resolves people's problems? Who do residents look to for protection? Who outside the community has an interest in what happens inside it, and how has that interest shown itself in the past? Taken together, the answers to these and many other questions build up a robust political and economic analysis that can improve programming and increase a stabilisation effort's prospect of success.

Across most donor-initiated stabilisation efforts in recent history, granular preparations of this kind have rarely occurred. As a result, interventions have sometimes been wasteful or have exacerbated

the conflicts that donors were trying to address. In the absence of careful preparation by donors, a community that is experiencing violent conflict and that suddenly receives a valuable resource (a clinic, training, access to an agriculture advisor, etc.) will rarely be equipped to make peaceful and equitable use of it, or ensure that it benefits residents. Too often, power brokers will use the resource to benefit their supporters or identity groups, corrupt officials will distribute the resource to the highest bidder, or insurgents will attack it to demonstrate the government's incompetence or side with whoever does not benefit from the resource in order to deepen their support base.

Interventions can simply add fuel to the fire if they are politically ill informed and context-blind. This can damage the credibility of donors and deepen a community's lack of trust. In fact, if donors and their partners are operating without information, it is likely that their smartest course of action will be to do nothing.

The better solution, of course, is for donors to insist that partners prepare properly, and allow them the time and resources to acquire essential knowledge before programming begins. In practice, this has proved difficult for several reasons. First, as detailed in Section 5.2.3, donors struggle to train their

own diplomats and aid professionals to operate in war zones. Once in the field, few international officials will be equipped to help partners develop conflict analyses, recognise when critical information is absent, and raise red flags when they should.

Second, donors hesitate to spend aid money on contextual research because there are seemingly no direct beneficiaries. The same thinking leads implementing partners to stress how little they spend on overhead and how much goes directly to those in need. In a war zone, however, money spent on conflict analysis, which then informs programming, is not an overhead; it is an investment, vital for the health and safety of the people experiencing conflict. In Afghanistan, the U.S. government spent USD 4.7bn on stabilisation programmes between 2002 and 2017, and only *one* programme (with a USD 40m budget) commissioned third-party research in advance to understand the political context in communities that were to be its beneficiaries.⁶⁹ In other words, just 0.8% of U.S. stabilisation funds were invested in an effort to avoid making the problem worse. Other programmes figured the situation out as they went along, usually with quite poor results. In other contexts, where research is properly conducted, donors struggle to ensure findings are incorporated into strategic planning and the development of theories of change.

Donors hesitate to spend aid money

on contextual research because there are seemingly no direct beneficiaries. In a war zone, however, money spent on conflict analysis... is an investment, vital for the health and safety of the people experiencing conflict.

For perspective, before launching military operations, most advanced militaries conduct what is often called ‘intelligence preparation of the battlefield’ (IPB). IPB is a detailed analysis of the terrain and the weather. It includes the ‘human terrain’ as well as enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures. This preparation is costly and time consuming, but it saves lives because it allows militaries to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to potential risks that might otherwise undermine their operations or put their troops in danger. IPB is a conceptual model that could assist civilian officials to manage programming risks that occur when they lack essential information about conflict-affected environments and seek to fill those gaps. Adopting it would require donors to fund partners specialising in conflict research to conduct hundreds of interviews and hold gatherings with community leaders, religious leaders, host nation officials, civil society leaders, academics, and others; and to repeat this process regularly as the context and the conflict evolve. This kind of preparation should be considered a standard cost of pursuing stabilisation efforts.

5.2 Tangible improvements to programming

While donor-initiated stabilisation efforts have rarely succeeded, trial and error have yielded some insights into sound programme implementation.

5.2.1 Successful stabilisation depends on the presence of a modicum of local governance

Because stabilisation programmes support communities that live in different contexts and face differing degrees of crisis, each community and each intervention is specific. In some communities, the insecurity is such that governance has completely broken down and rudimentary governance struc-

tures need to be built or rebuilt from scratch once conditions become safe enough. Other communities are vulnerable and have weak governance but are in a position to receive more services, engage in peacebuilding, and do other things that might make them more resilient. Yet donors and host nation of-

⁶⁹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2018), ‘Stabilisation: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan’, p. 84.

officials have a tendency to treat communities that are in these two states in the same way. This becomes especially harmful when a community without legitimate governance structures, which is recovering from a recent tragedy, is suddenly flush with cash.

Given the dangers of programming in chronically dangerous areas (as detailed in Section 5.1.3), the most efficient approach is to prioritise work in areas where functional if rudimentary governance structures are in place. Stabilisation efforts are more successful when they have something to build on. A community needs formal or informal leaders who

can help shape and take credit for progress. If such leaders are absent or their role is not recognised, stabilisation funding is not likely to be fruitful. Their quality and representativeness matters: stabilisation efforts should specifically promote and recognise the critical role played by, among others, women's networks at community level. Their typical emphasis on reconciliation, inclusivity, economic development, education, and transitional justice can build bridges between local and central government and help central government to understand the grievances of contested communities.

5.2.3 Clustering interventions, emphasising relationships

Even the exceptionally well-funded stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq struggled to prioritise programme interventions. Even if donors agreed to exclusively target communities with functional but rudimentary governance, they would be faced by far more communities than they could realistically reach. Which ones should receive support? What kinds of support should they receive? In what order should communities be approached? It might be argued that programmes should spread interventions across the geography, because each project might then benefit more people—a metric that appeals to donors. On the other hand, experience has shown that the impact of such an intuitively attractive approach would not be sufficiently concentrated to change behaviour and reduce conflict sustainably. To show the scale of this problem, between 2013 and 2020 the UN completed only 490 'quick impact projects' in Mali, which has a population of nearly 20 million spread across a country twice the size of France.⁷⁰

Building a school for a community may provide a lift, but it is usually short-lived. In this respect, 'projects' need to be distinguished from 'service delivery'. Essentially, service delivery lasts beyond the time it takes to build a piece of infrastructure. Even

if human and material resources are insufficient to enable every contested community to feel that it is well-supported, a middle ground can be found that goes beyond the delivery of one-off projects. To pursue the school example, when government officials come together with the community, discuss their interests in good faith, and decide where the school will go, where teachers will be found, and how students will obtain the learning materials they need, their interaction creates a stronger and more sustained sense of service to the community than the school's construction could achieve by itself.

So, while physical projects may contribute to a community's confidence that it is supported, they cannot replace the value of building relationships between different stabilisation stakeholders. Indeed, the peacebuilding field has demonstrated for decades that strong relationships are the foundation of resilient and stable communities. Emphasising the relationship-building component of stabilisation requires donors, government officials and partners to be devoted and patient, as well as realistic, since the constraints on human capital mean that the success of a relational approach will be uneven across time and space.

⁷⁰ MINUSMA, 'QIPs Overview - Mali', 30 September 2020, at https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2013-2020_qips_overview_en_0.pdf.

5.2.4 Cash-for-work also depends on relationships

Many stabilisation efforts adopted a theory of change that assumed conflict is tied to poverty and that communities will be less likely to turn to violence if their economic prospects improve. Whereas long-term economic development might focus on facilitating business investment or building value chains, stabilisation programmes often put large sums into community employment schemes, usually to create short-term jobs, generally manual labour. The theory of change is that money reduces grievances and incentives to fight, and so undermines the ability of violent groups to offer competitive wages or compelling narratives for criminal or insurgent activity.

Stabilisation programmes assume that the relationship between employment programmes and peace is well-established. However, there is little evidence for the claim that short-term employment on its own reduces violence in contested communities. Reliable data is not usually available on the incidence of violent behaviour before a programme begins, making it difficult to know what interventions have the most significant impact.⁷¹ One impact evaluation study in Afghanistan even found that employment outcomes had no impact on stability outcomes, and concluded that youths in work were as likely to support the Taliban as those who were unemployed.⁷² Worse, some studies have even found a positive correlation between employment and support for political violence.⁷³ Social status and opportunities to contribute to the community were far stronger indicators of support for peace than employment, while experiences of injustice were a more robust predictor of violence. While there may be a link between employ-

ment programmes and stability, therefore, far more thinking needs to be done about what types of employment should be provided, by whom, to whom, and for what wider purpose. Many employment schemes grounded in market analysis focus on young men of 'fighting age'. Once again, the underlying logic is to seduce or divert those 'most likely' to use violence; but the logic is flawed. It overlooks the deep political grievances that lie at the core of conflicts, and tries to plaster over them with economic solutions.

This is especially relevant to schemes in the security sector. Recruitment of young men for national service is quite a standard approach of stabilisation efforts, because it increases national security capacity and encourages young men and women to support, and securitise, the State-building project. Many young men and women accept these roles willingly, even with pride; but for others it is a job of last resort. In addition, as we have seen in Afghanistan and other places, joining security forces is a highly political choice that carries significant risk. Improving employment and improving the prospects of stabilisation are both sensible goals; but beefing up security does not guarantee the achievement of either. Without extensive community consultation and deeper thinking about the types of jobs that can really contribute to sustaining conditions for stability, temporary employment schemes and mass recruitment schemes should both be avoided.

There is little evidence that short-term employment on its own reduces violence in contested communities.

71 Brück, T., Ferguson, N. T. N., Izzi, V., Stojetz, W. (2016), '[Jobs Aid Peace: A Review of the theory and practice of the impact of employment programmes on peace in fragile and conflict-affected countries](#)', International Security and Development Center.

72 Mercy Corps (2015), 'Does Youth Employment Build Stability?', at <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-employment-stability>.

73 Mercy Corps (2013), 'Examining the Links between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement, and Conflict: Evidence from Mercy Corps' Somali Youth Leaders Initiative', at https://www.dmeforpeace.org/sites/default/files/somaliabrief_2_13_13.pdf.

5.2.4 Flexibility is critical even if it is costly

Conflict dynamics often change quickly and demand equally fast changes among donors and partners. Confronted by challenges such as attempted coups, insurgent attacks, massacres by security forces, inter-communal conflict, and climate-driven competition over resources, donors will find themselves urgently needing to extinguish growing fires or contain new ones in novel ways. The scope of programmes may need to change so that new activities are permitted, new geographies or beneficiaries targeted, or funds shifted into or out of the capital.

Sometimes adaptations are revolutionary. For example, because donors are actually allied with some insurgents in Syria, stabilisation programmes there were building local governance institutions that undermined central governance.⁷⁴ A programme in Afghanistan designed to build resilience in communities was re-tasked to support a critical national election and could only do so because it was among the rare U.S. government programmes to have the

requisite flexibility.⁷⁵ Attempting any of this requires experimentation and acceptance of possible failures.

Laws, regulations and oversight mechanisms for development spending are designed to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse. Yet they also prevent government institutions from adapting to fast changing conflict. Even when exceptions are made, flexible programmes require more oversight personnel to do the conceptual heavy lifting and push the necessary paperwork. However, those personnel already have to be in place in anticipation of the need for flexibility. Putting them in place is costly and therefore requires diverting some money away from beneficiaries, a liability for most donors. In short, most donors have devised systems and cultures for conceiving and implementing programmes that are well suited to the average development problem but poorly suited to crisis and conflict. These systems are then passed on to partners.

5.3 Monitoring and evaluating stabilisation efforts is especially hard and especially important

Sometimes, stabilisation programmes unintentionally worsen conflict dynamics.⁷⁶ Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes are an obvious countermeasure for mitigating such problems. How-

ever, limited access to beneficiaries, shifting strategic and programmatic priorities, and significant conceptual and logistical hurdles all present challenges to stabilisation M&E.

5.3.1 Identifying what should be measured

As noted in Section 5.1.2, it is critical to plan and prepare for a stabilisation effort carefully, because stakeholders need both to understand its objectives and identify specific benchmarks of progress that can be measured. The most common default objective is to ‘improve security’, which begs two questions:

- Security for whom? For security forces, government officials, the population, the donor, or some combination of them?
- What is security? Is security an absence of conflict or a more maximal vision of human security that includes human rights and political inclusion?

74 Brown, F. Z. (2018), ‘Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

75 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2018), ‘Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan’, p. 134.

76 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2018), ‘Stabilisation: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan’; Attree, L. and Street, J. (2022), ‘No shortcuts to security: Learning from responses to armed conflicts involving proscribed groups’, Saferworld, pp. 23-36.

Answering these questions may be hard. It becomes even more difficult if conflict analyses indicate that the actions of the host government are driving instability. Instead of something as simple as the number of violent attacks or casualties, monitors need

to be able to measure values and indicators that are harder to tally, such as the legitimacy of the government, or public trust, while simultaneously respecting national sovereignty and protecting civilians, as required by international law.

5.3.2 Identifying what information will provide relevant measurements

If it is evident that contested communities need more legitimate government in their lives, stakeholders must decide how achievement of that goal can be measured. Given the challenges involved, donors and partners often default to measuring whatever is readily available: number of projects, number of people employed, and ‘burn rate’ (how fast the money is being spent). These quantitative measurements create perverse incentives that can hurt programme quality, exacerbate conflict, and increase corruption. In addition, they cannot begin to measure what stabilisation stakeholders hope for. They are just ‘outputs’, statistics that show project completion rather than success. Counting the presence of government in contested communities will not capture its quality or the extent to which local populations perceive government to be more or less legitimate or responsive.

Recognising this, some stabilisation programmes have tried to use slightly more thoughtful measurements, such as the number of government vacancies filled at local level, or the number of meetings between officials and community members. But these are still outputs, not outcomes. The real question to be asked is: Are meetings, officials, and services convincing contested communities that they

can safely adopt non-violent means to address their grievances and solve their problems? To find out whether people are convinced of something, they need to be asked.

To find out whether people are convinced of something, they need to be asked.

After trying to use outputs to assess the impact of billions of dollars of stabilisation spending in Afghanistan, USAID developed a tool called ‘Measuring Impacts of Stabilisation Initiatives’ (MISTI) in 2012. This programme collected perception data, in contested communities before and after interventions, and in communities that did and did not receive projects. It was expensive and sometimes methodologically problematic, but MISTI was an improvement on other attempts to monitor and evaluate stabilisation. It was able to determine, for instance, that projects located in areas that were heavily contested or controlled by the Taliban were actually destabilising. This helped show USAID that programming to extinguish sparks is more productive than programmes to put out conflagrations; and that the answers to longstanding stabilisation dilemmas can often be provided by local populations who experience conflict daily.

5.3.3 Collecting the necessary information

It is obviously dangerous to collect the information needed for M&E in conflict zones, particularly if the areas prioritised for stabilisation are extremely insecure. It is also problematic methodologically. For example, it is difficult to create a sound random sample because many eligible respondents must be skipped to keep the surveyor safe, which can quickly skew the dataset.

The M&E process itself creates a paradox for evaluators. Consider a community dialogue process. M&E surveyors might ask community members how likely they are to solve their disputes non-violently, and compare their answers before and after the dialogue. They would then cross-reference the result against levels of violence to correlate the perception of violence and the incidence of violence. However, programmes and the security forces that protect them

are often attacked because insurgents want to discredit the government and any authority other than their own. Where this happens, it is almost impossible to judge what violence is coincidental, and what violence happens because of the programme. More-

over, though any stabilisation project that attracts additional violence can be said to have 'failed', from an M&E perspective, it is difficult to know whether the failure was due to the methodology used or its implementation. ■





Interpeace Headquarters

Maison de la Paix
2E Chemin Eugène-Rigot
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
info@interpeace.org

www.interpeace.org



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