K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Approaches to Stabilisation

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Question

What evidence is available on Area Based Stabilisation (ABS) particularly focusing on its key characteristics, strengths, weaknesses and how is it different from other approaches to stabilisation? What are the lessons learned from the attempts to implement ABS?

Contents

1. Overview

This rapid literature review explores how approaches to stabilisation have varied by the donor, local context, and over time. While this paper was framed around a research question on the "Area Based Stabilisation" (ABS) approach, this term is barely used in the literature. Therefore, it is not possible to define an ABS approach or compare it to other approaches. However, there is considerable literature on approaches to stabilisation more generally, with some comparative analysis of approaches by donors and how these are evolving according to the context and some illustrative lessons from their application. As per the question from FCDO, this query also draws on analyses of the following case examples: Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RSS) of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region; Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Afghanistan; Area Based Recovery Approach (ABRA) in Iraq; and the Stabilisation Facility for Libya (SFL). As the Stabilisation Unit (2019) emphasises, as the purpose of engaging in stabilisation activities, and the political and conflict contexts, vary so much, it is only possible to draw out some generic/illustrative lessons across cases.

Due to the policy focus of this paper, this rapid literature review draws predominantly on policy and practitioner texts, including some unpublished papers provided by FCDO. It draws on some academic texts, particularly for the text on general approaches to stabilisation and on high-level lessons and critiques of the stabilisation agenda. This paper prioritises literature published within the last five years. However, it also includes evaluative papers published in the 2000s and 2010s that focus on the stabilisation interventions carried out in those decades. This rapid review is not comprehensive but is illustrative of some of the key debates and lessons regarding stabilisation approaches.

Key points

Stabilisation approaches

Definition and common features - The term stabilisation is generally used to describe broad-ranging military and civilian efforts to prevent or address instability in a foreign country, it is an essentially contested concept, and stabilisation activities range widely.

The evolving stabilisation agenda - Stabilisation is a policy-driven and often controversial concept that is grounded in the military sphere yet is used alongside a broad range of security, peace, and state-building concepts. Its debates build on discussions around the security-development nexus and liberal interventionism that have evolved since the end of the Cold War. More recent approaches have shifted "at least rhetorically" with military activities taking "a back seat, while political and civilian aspects are given a much higher priority" (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020). Shifts in the practical approach of donors include moves towards: more context-specific, problem-focussed, and iterative approaches, and strategies with narrower objectives and clearer priorities.

Hot stabilisation versus a political approach to stabilisation – One way that donor approaches are analysed comparatively is between "hot" compared to political approaches (Pedersen, 2019). The older, hot stabilisation approach "emphasises the military aspects of conflict resolution and enlists civilian actors and aims as a means to further the goal of stabilising the situation and laying the ground for a sustainable order that can be maintained by local actors… [where the focus in on] (re-) establishing the state's monopoly on violence and strengthening the legitimate authority of the state through institution building and the delivery of key public services" (Pedersen, 2019, p.12). While a political approach to stabilisation (a more recently popular approach) focuses on "forging a new and more inclusive political settlement that can ensure stability in heterogeneous societies... to foster a renegotiation of power-sharing arrangements to enable non-violent forms of politics to emerge and deal with the basic disagreements over interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power" (Pedersen, 2019, p.13-14). This approach diverges between those that focus on elites and elite bargains (which might lead to shorter stabilisation interventions around power-sharing), and those that focus on grassroots/people-centred approached to build inclusive societies (a longer-term perspective).

The approaches that different donors choose to pursue can be understood through analysis of donor countries' histories (particularly military cultures and recent experiences in interventions/conflict management), norms, capacities for engagement, and their overarching national and institutional priorities and strategies. Section 2 provides some details of the approaches taken by: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States (US),

United Nations (UN), and the Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RSS) of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Basin Region. Section 2.6 includes a table comparing the approaches of seven donors.

Sub-national approaches to stabilisation - The PRTs and RSS may be considered as sub-national approaches (or an area-based approach) to stabilisation as they attempt to address stabilisation through the selection of specific sub-national areas for in-depth work. Site selection is made according to the political-security relevance of the area within the conflict context, with the ambition that these areas can later be expanded to include new areas for stabilisation. The sub-national interventions are linked to an overarching strategy, and ownership by national authorities, but focus on addressing the local stabilisation needs and local communities. The pursuit of a sub-regional approach to stabilisation might reflect resource constraints, or a pragmatic approach when there is contested legitimacy of the national authority.

Stabilisation programming - In practice, stabilisation activities are broad and multifaceted. E.g. a systematic review of development and stabilisation programming in Afghanistan found the most common forms of "stabilisation programming" include (Iyengar, et al., 2017): improving local government capacity for service delivery; community-led small infrastructure projects; youth training and education; agricultural development; short-term employment generation efforts; infrastructure improvement; and health and social well-being.

Lessons from stabilisation approaches

Conceptual issues complicate drawing lessons as the term is subject to variable and often inconsistent application among actors. Yet there are some benefits to the lack of definition in allowing donors greater flexibility when designing interventions.

A controversial approach to peacebuilding and development - Widespread critiques of stabilisation include: that it side-lines peacebuilding for more militaristic interventions; it privileges international (western) norms; it leads to the securitisation of international interventions; and that stabilisation has increased security risks by blurring the lines between military and humanitarian and aid workers.

Hot versus political approaches to stabilisation - The hot stabilisation approach is critiqued as erroneously focussing on service delivery as a means to build state legitimacy and stability, and for assuming a depoliticised and technocratic approach to what are highly political issues and contexts. While the political approach to stabilisation is critiqued for its higher ambitions and thus lower feasibility e.g. in its emphasis on "contextualised, flexible, open-ended processes rather than specific programmes" (Pedersen, 2019, p.14).

Sub-national approach - The site selection for the sub-national approach to stabilisation is of central importance, yet is fraught with difficulties, e.g. by prioritising certain parts of the country over others and requiring close dialogue and coordination with authorities (especially security services) while also taking a conflict sensitive approach to minimise exacerbating conflict tensions. Other lessons include the need for: highly localised, granular, and ongoing context analysis; and the need for the interventions to be undertaken in the name of the national/local government and not the supporting donors.

Overarching lessons on stabilisation – Some overarching lessons on stabilisation programmes are included at the end from the Stabilisation Unit (2019); Iyengar, Shapiro and Hegarty (2017); and UNDP (2021,b).

2. Stabilisation approaches

Definition and common features

The term stabilisation is generally used to describe broad-ranging military and civilian efforts to prevent or address instability in a foreign country (Pedersen et al., 2019). A few definitions from donors are included in 2.3, however stabilisation is an essentially contested concept, and stabilisation activities range widely (see 2.5). For the donors that explicitly define stabilisation, the definitions range from predominant military interventions (e.g. formerly the US), to the building of "liberal states" and promotion of the rule of law and democracy (e.g. the Netherlands, and the UK (until 2018)) (Pedersen, et al., 2019); while the UNDP appears to use the term as a synonym for peacebuilding, recovery or conflict prevention find Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020). Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020) argue that "contrary to the growing conceptualisation of stabilisation as a primarily civilian activity, it has often been viewed by both its supporters and its critics as a military activity similar to counterinsurgency (COIN), sometimes even used synonymously". A literature review by Pedersen et al. (2019) on lessons from stabilisation, including comparative analysis of the approaches of seven donors, identifies the lack of consensus on a definition and uses the following to guide its analysis: "stabilisation is associated with joined-up or integrated civilian/military efforts undertaken by external actors in conflict situations where there is no peace to keep".[1]

Some actors consciously do not define stabilisation due to a range of factors such as institutional difficulties in reaching an agreement on the definition, or to allow for flexibility in subsequent programming (Pedersen et al., 2019). Pedersen et al. (2019, p.18) highlight that "the UK's stabilisation program stands out in relation to its conscious conceptual evolution of stabilisation, its support to academic research and its development of policies and guides for stabilisation efforts". In the case of ABS, this rapid review found no definition of the approach online nor conceptual discussions that clearly refer to the approach.

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[1] Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020, p.8) identify the following common features that allow for a better general understanding of stabilisation and its place in the peacebuilding spectrum: (a) an intermediate peacebuilding objective in immediate or post-conflict situations - Stabilisation, is understood as that aspect of peacebuilding which is intended to work close to a hot phase of a violent conflict. At the core is the question of which priorities are most relevant in the short run to overcome the violent phase of a conflict; (b) political arrangements for the transformation of violent conflicts - The most important strategic goal of stabilisation is the transformation of acute or imminent violent conflict into a political arrangement that permits non-violent conflict management. It is now stressed that stabilisation is above all a political undertaking that supports conflict management by local actors. This requires a comprehensive (or integrated) approach, in which civilian and military instruments are aligned with this strategic goal; (c) security as a prerequisite and objective - Stabilisation must provide a minimum of the public good security in order to achieve its strategic goal. This is a prerequisite for the political process and for protecting the population that is impacted by conflict; and (d) a comprehensive approach - Depending on the conflict context, stabilisation calls for a combination of diplomatic, developmental and security policy instruments. Agreement exists that impact can only be achieved through a consistently applied comprehensive approach under civilian leadership.

2.1 The evolving stabilisation agenda

> "The renaissance of realpolitik yet with military in the backseat"
> (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020)

Stabilisation is a policy-driven and often controversial concept that emerged in the context of the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans and the so-called war on terror (Mac Ginty, 2012; Goxho, 2021). It is grounded in the military sphere yet is used alongside a broad range of security, peace, and state-building concepts, and its debates build on the discussions around the security-development nexus and liberal interventionism that have evolved since the end of the Cold War (Pedersen et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2017).

Some donors - such as the US - have seen their participation in stabilisation "swing dramatically" in the past 17 years from low levels of participation and preparation in stabilisation, to huge investments of resources, widespread activities, and optimism in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now to a significant scaling back of commitment and resources (Robinson, et al., 2018, p.1). In tandem, donor strategies and ways of working have also evolved over time. As Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020) explain, "overall, the discourse on stabilisation reflects a renaissance of realpolitik in international conflict management. Since the results of the extensive state- and nation-building programmes under the so-called liberal peace agenda have been sobering, there is now greater emphasis that stabilisation pursues only an intermediate goal that is less ambitious, but promises greater chances of being achieved at all: The creation of a political arrangement that permits non-violent conflict management". More recent approaches have shifted "at least rhetorically" with military activities taking "a back seat, while political and civilian aspects are given a much higher priority. This confirms the mantra that is often heard, but usually too simplistically understood: that conflicts cannot be resolved militarily, and that the political dimension is the greatest challenge of peacebuilding", explain Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020). Shifts in the practical approach of donors include, e.g. a move towards more context-specific, problem-focussed, and iterative approaches, and strategies with narrower objectives and clearer priorities (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020).

2.2 Hot stabilisation versus a political approach to stabilisation

A key way to analyse the differences in donor approaches to stabilisation is to differentiate between a "hot" approach and a political approach. Pedersen (2019, p.12-14) provides a useful comparative explanation of these approaches as:

- **A hot stabilisation approach,**[2] an older approach predominantly developed by US academics and actors, "emphasises the military aspects of conflict resolution and enlists civilian actors and aims as a means to further the goal of stabilising the situation and laying the ground for a sustainable order that can be maintained by local actors" (p.12). The approach "assumes that simply defeating the enemy through kinetic operations will not in and of itself provide stability: Incentives must also be made for the population to turn against the insurgency and reinforce the basis for a social contract... The focus in

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[2] A hot approach is also often used synonymously with the concepts of a "minimalist" or counter-insurgency (COIN) approach (Pedersen, 2019).

both is on (re-) establishing the state's monopoly on violence and strengthening the legitimate authority of the state through institution building and the delivery of key public services. The main difference seems to be the extent to which the actual fighting is left to local forces."

- **A political approach to stabilisation[3]** is more popularly discussed in recent years in policy and academia and "revolves around forging a new and more inclusive political settlement that can ensure stability in heterogeneous societies... [with the aim of stabilisation] to foster a renegotiation of power-sharing arrangements to enable non-violent forms of politics to emerge and deal with the basic disagreements over interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power". "This renegotiation is distinct from the notion of a social contract between state and people that underpins the liberal peace model and to some extent also the counter-insurgency, hot stabilisation model." The burgeoning political settlements literature includes those that favour focusing on elites and elite bargains (which in stabilisation terms might lead to a focus on shorter interventions around power-sharing), and those that take a more grassroots/people-centred approach to build inclusive societies (a longer-term perspective to stabilisation). Both approaches argue "that once the political settlement is inclusive enough, stability will follow". The use of aid in this approach is "to support the forging of an inclusive political process and by buying time and space for local actors to renegotiate their relationships rather than as a vehicle for delivering tangible development outcomes".

The approaches that different donors choose to pursue can be understood through analysis of donor countries' histories, norms, and capacities for engagement - particularly their military cultures and recent experiences in interventions/conflict management. Maley (2007) explains how the approaches of the PRTs in Afghanistan varied: according to the local contexts (location and specific security and development needs); the practices and military cultures of the contributing and leading states; and how effectively the donors and implementing actors engage with local leaderships and populations. E.g. histories about how force has been used in external interventions, how militaries are organised, norms around what is seen as appropriate roles for PRTs, and more generally, the perspectives, interests and positions of the institutions involved in designing and implementing the strategies (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020; Maley, 2007). Donor programme documents generally frame their strategies as being informed by their previous experiences, and respective analyses and evaluations of these.

Donor approaches to stabilisation are also shaped by their overarching national and institutional priorities and strategies (Stabilisation Unit, 2019), e.g. an evaluation of the UNDP's Integrated Regional Stabilization of the Lake Chad Basin emphasises how the approach is aligned with the agendas of the core implementing and funding agencies – the UNDP's Strategic Plan, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the German Federal Foreign Office's political aims (UNDP, 2021,b).

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[3] This approach is also known through the terms – political settlements, "doing development differently", "thinking and working politically", "working with the grain", etc

2.3 Sub-national[4] approaches to stabilisation

The PRTs and RSS may be considered as sub-national approaches (or an area-based approach) to stabilisation as they attempt to address stabilisation through the selection of specific sub-national areas for in-depth work. The Stabilisation Unit (2019, p.14) also identifies that the Funding Facility for Stabilisation (FFS) (in Iraq), and to an extent, the Syria Stabilisation Response Mechanism (SRM) and the Somalia Stability Fund Phase II (SSF) as examples of where stabilisation activities were carried out in depth in specific locations.

Site selection is made according to the political-security relevance of the area within the national, local, and/or regional conflict context (UNDP, 2020, p.16). They are "fragile areas with important socio-economic potential, where regular recovery and development interventions currently cannot be implemented" (UNDP, 2021,b, p.15). E.g. the Funding Facility for Stabilisation (FFS) supports Sunni-majority areas affected directly by Daesh to encourage internally displaced people to return, and the Somalia Stability Fund Phase II (SSF) works on peacebuilding and reconciliation in areas prone to conflict or at risk of alignment with Al Shabaab (Stabilisation Unit, 2019). The idea is that initial areas that are stabilised can be expanded to include new areas for stabilisation activities (UNDP, 2020).

A policy document by UNDP (2021,b) on the Stabilisation of the Liptako-Gourma Region sets out the UNDP's approach which involves the selection of ten sub-national target communities across three countries in the large Lake Chad region for an initial phase of 'immediate' stabilisation programming, which would later be expanded to more sub-national areas. The interventions are linked to an overarching strategy, and national ownership by national authorities, but focus on addressing the local stabilisation needs and local communities (UNDP, 2021,b).

> "Interventions in the selected communities are expected to contribute to stabilisation of the zones beyond the area itself, because the chosen locality is important for the surrounding areas from a political, security, economic and/or social point of view. It could e.g. be an important market place, a transport hub, a key segments of a main road, a model for social cohesion, or a centre for access to state and local government services. As much as possible, the selection of communities should also prepare for the next round of expansion of immediate stabilisation, based on security strategies, the capacity of the state and local government to sustain investments, and the presence of other stabilisation and development actors" (UNDP, 2021,b, p.20).

In an internal paper drawing lessons from stabilisation facilities, the Stabilisation Unit (2019, p.14) explores the question of favouring breadth or depth of coverage for stabilisation approaches. It finds that, "in most cases, it could be argued that both are necessary… Breadth of geographic coverage is often required when supporting a national settlement process. This was a priority in Somalia, and to a lesser extent in Libya. It requires a significant field presence by implementing partners and makes focussing in-depth in specific locations harder in terms of resource availability and deployment".

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[4] This is a term used by this author as perhaps being a clearer term than ABS, but note that the literature does not use the term "sub-national" or any other specific term to describe these approaches

This rapid review found no broader discussion online critiquing stabilisations approaches through a sub-national (or ABS) approach, compared to a national approach. However, the Stabilisation Unit (2019), and some other anecdotal references, suggest that the approach might be understood to reflect resource constraints, or a pragmatic approach when there is contested legitimacy of the national authority. E.g. a paper on the Helmand PRT approach mentions in passing that the UK took over the Helmand PRT and that, in contrast to previous UK approaches, "it focuses on the concentration and prioritisation of all resources. Accordingly, all civil and military activities to be carried out in Helmand will concentrate on and prioritise five main geographical areas or district centres, and will be controlled by the concept of a politically-led counterinsurgency campaign" (Thruelsen, 2008). And, a strategic review of the SFL suggests that the approach is "based upon the acceptance that the [Government of National Accord] GNA, although recognised by the international community as the legitimate government of Libya, does not enjoy widespread support within the country" (UNDP 2018, in Stabilisation Unit, 2019, p.6). It may be the case that more extended analysis on specific case studies – in a comparative way - would yield more distinction between a sub-national and a national approach.[5]

2.4 Examples of approaches

The following examples have been selected according to their relevance to what might be understood as an ABS approach.

UNDP approach

The UNDP defines stabilisation "as a time bound, integrated programme of activities in areas cleared and held through military action intended to create confidence in, and provide support to an ongoing peace process internationally recognised (including through a Security Council mandate) while laying the building blocks for longer-term peacebuilding and development by delivering a peace dividend to local communities and seeking to extend legitimate political authority" (UNDP 2019 in Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020, p.26). This definition is also quoted in other papers, however, the original UNDP strategy document on stabilisation is not available online. The UNDP (2021,b, p.14) identifies three focus areas for stabilisation:

(1) Rehabilitation of essential infrastructure and basic services;
(2) Physical security and access to justice; and
(3) Revitalisation of the local economy.

Programming is differentiated according to being "immediate stabilisation" (taking place over a maximum of 18 months) or "extended stabilisation" (longer-term reforms, recovery and peacebuilding interventions to address underlying and root causes to conflict, e.g. in the areas of governance and reconciliation) (UNDP, 2021, p.14).

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[5] This would also allow for more time to filter through resources that usually use the term "regional" to mean sub-continental approaches rather than sub-national

US approach

The US joint military doctrine from 2016 defines stabilisation as: "the process by which military and non-military actors collectively apply various instruments of national power to address drivers of conflict, foster host-nation resiliencies, and create conditions that enable sustainable peace and security" (Robinson, 2018, p.6). The US engages in stabilisation efforts throughout the world. However, these interventions have become smaller and more diffuse than in the 2000s – e.g. with major operations ending in Iraq in 2010 and in Afghanistan in 2014 (Robinson, 2018). The US has also included a stabilisation component either led or supported by the military in Central America, Haiti, Kosovo, Liberia, Libya, the Philippines, Syria, Somalia, etc.

UN approach

The UN has not formally defined what it means by stabilisation, but has carried out a wide range of activities under the guise of stabilisation, e.g. ranging from "the restoration and extension of state authority to security and justice sector reform, beyond the traditional peacekeeping role of the protection of civilians" (Robinson, 2018, p.29; Gilder, 2019). The lack of definition is widely critiqued, including from within the UN itself, yet reflects the concerns of various UN member states regarding sovereignty (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020; Gilder, 2019). The four UN peacekeeping operations that include the term stabilisation in the title share four common areas of engagement (Wittkowsky & Breuer, 2020, p.21):

- "A secure and stable environment that ensures the protection of the civilian population
- Political processes that strengthen state institutions, legitimise them and permit social reconciliation
- An effective and accountable security sector, and
- The rule of law and human rights."

All four missions have a strong military component, but also include civilian components that vary according to the context (e.g. the security sector in the DR Congo and regional development in Mali). Yet Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020, p.21) note that while there are common features, in practice, the UN's stabilisation operations are difficult to differentiate from non-stabilisation operations, and "the designation seems more likely to have followed political opportunities rather than conceptual considerations".

Example – the Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RSS) of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Basin Region

The Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RSS) of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Basin Region was adopted by The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in 2018, and endorsed by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (UNDP, n.d.a, p.1).

The RSS has nine pillars of intervention (UNDP, n.d.a, p.1):

1. Political Cooperation

2. Security and Human Rights
3. Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, Reinsertions and Reintegration of Persons associated with Boko Haram
4. Humanitarian Assistance
5. **Governance and the Social Contract**
6. **Socio-economic Recovery and Environmental Sustainability**
7. Education, Learning and Skills
8. **Prevention of Violent Extremism and Building Peace**
9. **Empowerment and Inclusion of Women and Youth**

The RSS focuses on stabilising, recovering, and building the resilience of affected communities in eight regions around the Lake Chad basin: in Cameroon, the Far North Region and North Region; in Chad, the Lac Region and Hajider Lamis Region; in Niger, the Differ region; and in Nigeria, the Adama State, Bono State, and Yobe State (UNDP, n.d.a, p.1).

The Regional Stabilisation Facility (RSF) supports the implementation of the RSS, and focuses on four of the RSS' nine pillars (UNDP, n.d.a, p.2):

- Governance & Social Contract
- Socio-economic Recovery and Environmental Sustainability
- Preventing of Violent Extremism and Building Peace
- Empowerment & Inclusion of Women and Youth.

A blog by Okeke (2020) (a UNDP coordinator of the UNDP Regional Programme for Africa) explicitly refers to the RSS approach (from 2019) as taking a political approach to stabilisation and development, a change from the predominant military approach taken from 2015.

2.5 Stabilisation programming

In practice, stabilisation activities are broad and multifaceted. In recognition of the lack of definitions and consensus on what stabilisation is, and the varied use of the term, Iyengar, et al. (2017) identify the most common types of aid labelled "stabilisation programming" that they found in their review of 89 papers on stabilisation initiatives in Afghanistan:

- Efforts to improve local government capacity for service delivery to increase legitimacy and strengthen ties with local communities
- Community-led small infrastructure projects to improve community cohesion and resilience to conflict
- Youth training and education to increase positive engagement with the community and reduce susceptibility to violent extremism
- Agricultural development to provide alternatives to poppy cultivation
- Short-term employment generation efforts often called "cash for work" programmes

In these papers, Iyengar, et al. (2017) found nearly 200 different indicators used to measure and track implicit or explicit definitions of stabilisation, which they categorise into the following groups (in order of their prevalence in the literature):

- Government capacity;
- Attitudes towards the Afghan government (including government at any level and civil society attitudes broadly such as support for voting, government-run institutions, and views on national identity);
- Security;
- Social cohesion;
- Attitudes towards anti-government elements (including criminal and insurgent groups);
- Economic well-being;
- Attitudes towards foreign actors;
- Infrastructure improvement; and
- Health and social well-being.

2.6 Comparing donor approaches

Pedersen et al. (2019, p.14-18) provide a useful table comparing the approaches of seven donors to stabilisation – see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comparing seven donor approaches to stabilisation*

*This reproduction of Pedersen et al.'s (2019) table does not include all of the sections included in the original paper, but just the sections that relate most to research questions of this paper.

Source: Pedersen et al. (2019, p.14-18) This figure has been removed for copyright reasons. The figure can be found at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/stabilization-development-nexus_low.pdf

3. Illustrative lessons[6]

3.1 Strategic lessons on stabilisation approaches

Conceptual issues complicate drawing lessons

The concept of stabilisation lacks definitional clarity and is subject to variable and often inconsistent application among international actors and even by the same actors across different contexts (Pedersen et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2017). As Pedersen et al. (2019) emphasise, both the scholarly and policy documents lack "an understanding of what it is, what it is not, and how it differs from and relates to other forms of multidimensional, international interventions in conflict-affected settings. As a result, the debate over what works in stabilisation remains equally confused and inconclusive".

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[6] As Stabilisation Unit (2019) emphasises, as the purpose of engaging in stabilisation activities, and the political and conflict contexts, vary so much, it is only possible to draw out some generic recommendations across cases

Yet Pedersen, et al. (2019) highlight that there are benefits of this lack of a definition as it can facilitate the understanding of stabilisation as a multifaceted and dynamic concept, which can allow for better cooperation between relevant actors at different stages of the stabilisation process, and can weaken silo mentalities. They note that this is a conscious approach of some donors to maintain the flexibility to support a broad range of interventions - from prevention to post-conflict assistance (e.g. Australia and Denmark) (Pedersen, et al., 2019).

A controversial approach to peacebuilding and development

There are widespread critiques of the concept of stabilisation as side-lining peacebuilding for more militaristic interventions. A widely cited paper by Mac Ginty (2012) emphasises how stabilisation is "an essentially conservative doctrine that runs counter to its stated aims of enhancing local participation and legitimacy. It is an agenda of control that privileges notions of assimilation with international (western) standards and mainstreams the military into peace-support operations. As a result, the value of peace is undercut". Yet Wittkowsky and Breuer (2020) find that "the accusation that stabilisation leads to the "securitisation" of international interventions is wide off the mark. Because without a minimum of security, no success can be achieved in other areas of sustainable peace and development either. This also justifies the importance of a potential military component that can intervene in the local balance of power and create the space needed for political processes." However, what is clear is that "it is not always clear whose security is at the focus of the stabilisation activities when reviewing the stabilisation programmes, but there appears to be a certain element of self-protection in the approach of many of the countries, notwithstanding that human security in recipient countries is also a focus" (Pedersen et al., 2019). Another widely made critique, particularly by NGOs, is that stabilisation has increased the security risks for humanitarian and aid workers by blurring the lines between military and humanitarian operations (Mitchell, 2015).

Hot versus political approaches to stabilisation

Key critiques of the hot stabilisation approach – from the political settlements literature - are that it erroneously focuses on service delivery as a means to build state legitimacy, and thus state stability, and also for assuming a depoliticised and technocratic approach to what are highly political issues and contexts (Pedersen, 2019). Meanwhile, the political approach to stabilisation is critiqued for its feasibility and ambitions – in being much more demanding for development agencies through its emphasis "on supporting contextualised, flexible, open-ended processes rather than specific programmes" which "prohibits not only the reliance on generic guidelines and best practices but also the identification of indicators and metrics and is thus inherently alien to the bureaucratic requirements of most agencies", as well as for political and military agencies (Pedersen, 2019, p.14). Political approaches to stabilisation can also "end up reproducing unfair, unjust and unequal systems of rule in a manner that may actually run counter to the strategic aim of stability" (Pedersen, 2019, p.14).

Pedersen (2019, p.14) reflects that "this takes us into a new round of reflections on what comes after stabilisation and whether stabilisation should be seen as an entry point that enables a wider and more long-term transformative, international engagement. Or, should stabilisation be understood as an exit strategy aimed at enabling domestic systems to maintain order within the territorial borders of the state? As such, we are back to the basic paradoxes and contradictions of

using external intervention to promote domestic order, including in particular the dilemma of making sure that what works in the short term does not run counter to what is necessary in the long term".

Sub-national approach

The site selection for the sub-national approach to stabilisation is of central importance, yet is fraught with difficulties, and as the Stabilisation Unit (2019, p.14) argues, "relies on a political strategy which in effect prioritises certain parts of the country over others". UNDP (2020) emphasise the importance of a "close and trustful dialogue and coordination with regional, national and local authorities, in particular with the security services, in the process of identification of the sites and the planning and implementation of stabilisation interventions" to ensure that they are "strategically selected from a political-security perspective in a logic that contributes to stabilisation of the area beyond the site itself". UNDP (2021,b, p.20) also identifies the importance of taking a conflict sensitive approach "to minimise the risk of being perceived as favouring certain groups, areas or actors over others and thereby creating or exacerbating tensions". Yet, as Gordon (2011, p.5) highlights in Afghanistan's Helmand region, the decision of where to locate PRT programming was very much shaped by the security profile, and it wasn't always well informed by local tribal representation and dynamics, thus "some communities and groups felt particularly excluded by the government and the PRT". A strategic review of the Stabilisation Facility for Libya (SFL) (2018, UNDP in Stabilisation Unit, 2019, p.6) emphasised the need for "stronger partnership arrangements with Libyan institutions that work nationally", in particular "to invest greater resources in the ability of municipalities to be meaningfully involved in stabilisation planning and delivery and to be as inclusive (of communities within municipalities) as possible."

This brings in another key point which is the need for programming to be informed by highly localised and granular context analysis, carried out on an ongoing basis, due to the variability and changeability of contexts (UNDP, 2020; Stabilisation Unit, 2019). Ways to address this include funding local assessment teams, hiring high-quality local staff for implementation that understand the culture and have access to locations (Stabilisation Unit, 2019). E.g. as part of the Liptako-Gourma Stabilisation Facility, the UNDP (2020) has proposed to create a 'Knowledge Hub' located in the region, partnered with research institutions, and closely linked to the Facility's monitoring and evaluation system. Yet as Stabilisation Unit (2019, p.15) highlights, good local analysis across a range of contexts is time and resource intensive and "makes it hard for donor-dominated centrally-located teams to make project level decisions, despite the need to offer this to maintain wide buy-in". Stabilisation Unit (2019, p.16) explores some ways these challenges were addressed, e.g. noting that for both the SSF and FFS "day-to-day decision making was devolved to implementers, whilst maintaining donor responsibility for strategic direction and decision making".

Another lesson from these mechanisms is the need for the interventions to be undertaken in the name of the national, state, or local government, and not the supporting donors, in line with the objectives of stabilisation being to strengthen the presence of the state, the (re)building of confidence in state institutions, and the renewal of the state-citizen social contract (UNDP, 2020).

3.2 Overarching lessons on stabilisation

An unpublished document by the Stabilisation Unit (2019) on lessons across stabilisation mechanisms in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Libya found:

- Ensure a clear understanding of the purpose of a stabilisation intervention and senior level ownership at the outset
- When working in coalition with other bilateral actors, demonstrate political commitment
- Make an explicit link to policy objectives and strategy
- Separate governance from executive functions
- Make things happen (be as involved as needed)
- Avoid delays in getting started
- Stay flexible but guard against mission creep
- Communicate results
- Understand the context

It sets out the following questions for starting points when considering stabilisation support:

- What is the purpose of stabilisation activity?
- What is the theory of change for achieving the desired outcomes?
- Are stabilisation efforts in support of a government, or a 'side' in a conflict?
- How proximate should stabilisation efforts be to violent conflict?
- How much does international coordination matter?
- How will stabilisation efforts transition?
- …and what comes next?
- What are the options for implementation?
- Is breadth or depth of coverage most important?
- How to deliver well locally?
- Is it possible to be gender and conflict sensitive?

A systematic review of 89 studies on development and stabilisation programming in Afghanistan (including the PRT in Helmand along with other interventions) by Iyengar, Shapiro and Hegarty (2017) found the following cross-cutting findings:

- Most stabilisation programs will have – at best – a modest impact (measured both quantitatively and qualitatively). Thus, based on the Afghanistan experience, policymakers and implementers should not expect to generate either large or persistent effects. "Successful" projects may demonstrate short-term positive impacts, but they do not appear to generate large shifts in security, attitudes, or capacity. This is relevant to manage expectations for programmes and for shaping monitoring and evaluation approaches.
- A number of studies indicate that smaller projects may be better as they: can be targeted at specific gaps; seem less likely to fuel instability; are often easier to manage by staff on the ground; are less likely than large infrastructure projects to attract attention from

corrupt officials or to become targets for sabotage; as outputs are small and less likely to become a source of conflict; and as any corruption will be smaller in scale and thus less likely to delegitimise the national government. Afghans also reacted positively to large-scale programmes that are populated by small, community-driven projects.

- Stabilisation efforts should be designed in ways that make it hard for destabilising forces to target or claim credit for programmes. Negative impacts can occur when: programmes are deliberately targeted and delegitimised by insurgents, or when insurgents take credit for positive effects or seek bribes from the programmes. The latter can raise perceptions of corruption, with the national government blamed, thereby reducing its legitimacy and increasing support for insurgents. An effective strategy is to ensure local government and local NGOs are visibly central to project implementation.

- Stabilisation efforts should be informed by lessons learned, yet many studies find that recommendations from evaluations have not been implemented. Programmes should particularly be wary of subordinating programming objectives to COIN objectives.

UNDP (2021,b, p.14-15) identifies the following lessons/critical themes from its experiences in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Lake Chad Basin, to inform its Stabilisation Mechanism in the Liptako-Gourma:

- **"Political commitment** – Full support from state authorities at central, subnational and local level needs to be secured and maintained from the outset in order to (a) avoid possible political bottlenecks, (b) enable leadership on political and military issues ensuring adequate security conditions for stabilisation interventions and (c) accompany interventions with possibly required reforms. Full support of the international community and main development and security partners is also required to provide appropriate resourcing and coordination.

- **Ownership, local leadership and participation** – Stabilisation interventions can be employed to address underlying psycho-social dynamics and contribute to the re-establishment of social cohesion, the promotion of local and regional identities and the shaping of a vision for the future. These dynamics can only be triggered and maintained through joint ownership between legitimate national/local authorities and target communities. In other words, state authorities need to be seen to initiate and implement activities and communities need to participate in planning and monitoring. The approach also needs to enable regional and local authorities such as governors and mayors to provide leadership and to assume their coordination role.

- **Governance structures and adaptability** – Operating in complex and often unpredictable environments requires initiatives to constantly adapt to changing realities. Implementation teams need to have both the authority and capacity to do so. In practice, this requires a high level of operational decentralisation and delegation of authority within the implementation structure. It also requires overall governance structures that allow for operational flexibility and efficiency while ensuring effective strategic oversight. Speed and scale – One of the most critical lesson is that stabilisation of fragile zones can only be achieved when interventions are indeed implemented rapidly enough and with sufficient resources to prevent further deterioration of the security situation. The capacities, management arrangements, operational processes and activities of stabilisation initiatives need to be designed accordingly. Moreover, the implementation at scale and speed in highly insecure environments comes at a cost. It requires capacities

fully dedicated to the task, and necessarily leads to comparably higher management ratios.

- **Situation analysis, monitoring and risk management** – Continuous monitoring and analysis of situation changes, impact of activities and community perceptions through continuous engagement with beneficiary communities is critical to provide time-sensitive information for course corrections and adaptation. It is also the backbone of successful risk management. Often, however, monitoring and analysis is deprioritized when operational bottlenecks take precedent and occupy the attention of managers. The establishment of a dedicated, separate monitoring and analysis capacity and/or the outsourcing thereof can help to avoid this pitfall. Analysis-related results should also be built into the theory of change and results chain.

- **Transparency and accountability** – The sensitivity of operating in fragile zones, the scale of investments and associated risks of corruption require that stabilisation activities are transparent to international partners, state authorities and target communities. This can only be achieved through continuous outreach and communication with stakeholders and through the establishment of a culture of transparency that permeates all involved processes. Moreover, it requires continuous, independent fiduciary monitoring.

- **Safeguarding the humanitarian space** – Stabilisation interventions are political in nature and should not be confused with humanitarian, peacebuilding and/or development interventions. They constitute foundations for recovery and development. Importantly, efforts should be made not to interfere with the humanitarian space and ongoing life-saving interventions. At the same time, information channels should be established at central and local levels.

- **Regional cooperation** – Where stabilisation happens in border areas, it is critical to accompany interventions with strengthened cross-border and regional cooperation that focuses on policy and technical issues addressing conflict drivers such as cross-border trade, transborder criminality and social cohesion. The development of a common regional stabilisation strategy has proven to facilitate this process."

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