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Rethinking Stability

Key Findings and Actionable Recommendations

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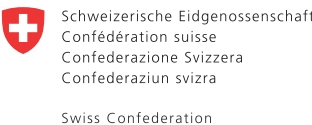
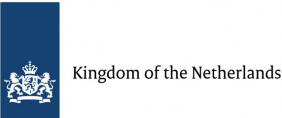


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1. Introduction to the Rethinking Stability initiative

In the last twenty years stabilisation has become perhaps the main approach through which international actors have engaged in conflict affected areas. Yet almost all stabilisation efforts have struggled, with the sources of instability more complicated and difficult to remedy than first envisaged. The definition of what ‘stabilisation’ actually constitutes remains ambiguous, with the term used inconsistently over time and in different contexts, so that aims and approaches have varied enormously in ambition and application between actor and place.¹ Stabilisation successes have been scant, and the field appears to be in something of a definitional and operational limbo, where despite their stated purpose of reducing violence and laying the structural foundations for longer-term security, most stabilisation efforts have too often not only failed but occasionally made conflict environments worse.

This context provided the rationale for the *Rethinking Stability* initiative. Launched in July 2020, it recognised that stabilisation efforts² in Afghanistan, the Sahel, and in north, east and central Africa were all struggling to build lasting peace and stability. The initiative sought to ask why, and in doing so discern how stabilisation efforts could better contribute to positive social and political changes in fragile environments.

Based on five private dialogues on three continents, in-depth desk and country research, and discussions with circa 1000 policy makers, academics, practitioners, and citizens who are experiencing stabilisation activities, this final paper sets out the project’s key lessons and suggests actionable recommendations for how the field can improve.

2. Executive Summary

Stabilisation has become a contested term, with actors using multiple tools and approaches for different and often inconsistent aims. However, it appears the field can agree on a few central tenets: that activities ought to improve the stability and peace of communities experiencing active armed conflict; that stabilisation is fundamentally a political process rather than an end-state³; and that efforts should be temporary and lay the foundations for longer-term, self-sustaining peace so that international actors can transition away from securitised roles and other functions that ought to be the preserve of host governments. Against these criteria, and despite significant investment, current stabilisation efforts have too often fallen short. This paper seeks to outline why this may be the case, and suggests some actionable recommendations that build on those agreed central tenets and can take the field forward.

At present, when we speak of stabilisation we are likely to be talking about at least three different practices. First, stabilisation refers to large multi-lateral operations used by the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), African Union (AU) and other agencies in response to conflict and fragility in a country. Second, it refers to the wider ‘industry’ of stabilisation, around which, driven by funding patterns, the myriad approaches of donors, NGOs, CSOs and others designed to bring about a cessation of violence have steadily congealed, replete with a whole spectrum of kinetic, developmental, diplomatic, and humanitarian practices. Third, stabilisation is undeniably an instrument of foreign policy deployed to advance national interests, with stabilisation departments embedded in multiple Foreign Ministries across the Global North.

1 Young, D., Bennett, W., Vinci, R., (2022), ‘Challenges and Opportunities in the Current Stabilisation Landscape: the Case for Rethinking Stability’, Interpeace; Gorur, A. (2022), ‘Defining the Boundaries of UN Stabilization Missions’, Stimson Institute.

2 Stabilisation is a contested term. As this paper is intended for a wide stabilisation audience, we speak of ‘stabilisation activities’ or ‘stabilisation efforts’ to capture the range of approaches undertaken in the sector. More specific terms, such as ‘operation’, ‘intervention’ or ‘mission’ are used where appropriate.

3 De Coning, C., (2018) ‘Adaptive peacebuilding’, *International Affairs*, Volume 94, Issue 2, March 2018, pp.301-317

These three practices can harbour competing and perhaps incompatible intentions and strategies. Sometimes a donor's foreign policy interests coalesce with those of a multilateral mission, the host state and its citizens, but more often they do not. It is problematic that stabilisation can be a foreign policy approach driven by national interest as much as an altruistic instrument for peace. It raises the necessary question "Who is stabilisation for?" Is the aim to prevent violence and protect human rights in pursuit of more just and peaceful societies, or to achieve narrower policy ambitions? Given the importance of upstream conflict prevention and mitigation, these objectives should not really be in competition. However, where they have been, such as in Afghanistan, we saw enduring international support for a narrow elite gradually divorce stabilisation efforts from the wider public, causing it eventually to unravel despite twenty years of activities.

The competitive nature of aims and strategies is one reason why stabilisation efforts have struggled to bring about the conditions necessary for safe political transition. This highlights another key finding of the initiative, that the theories of change which underpin stabilisation work are not fit for purpose.⁴ Two in particular need revisiting. First, the theory that the *return of the state* will catalyse peace has proved too reductive. Efforts to reestablish central authority without ensuring inclusion and popular legitimacy have increased instability in places such as Mali, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Where the state does return, state security forces usually take the lead, on the assumption that peace and stability are not possible in the absence of physical security. However, whilst security is an important enabler, it will not bring stabilisation on its own, especially if levels of predation by state security actors are high and trust in the state is low. What appears missing are theories of change that aim explicitly to improve state-society relationships at scale, not just state security, and introduce state agents and processes in ways and at

times that support genuine medium and long-term political stability. These are the improvements citizens want, but too often the people most affected by instability are passive recipients of stabilisation efforts, and have no influence on the theories and decisions governing the activities affecting their lives.⁵

Second, theories of change that prioritise security or kinetic operations in the most insecure areas have not built long-term stability. The challenges typical of the most insecure areas will not be solved quickly through force, and rushing to these 'hotter' areas can merely displace rather than resolve violence and instability.⁶ Current engagements are more often symptomatic than systematic; they set out to solve visible problems rather than the deeper structural forces that really drive conflict. Bolstering societal resilience in relatively stable areas first, and methodically building out from there to improve connectivity between otherwise fragmented areas and people in a considered manner, appears to be a more fruitful approach.⁷

There is broad agreement that stabilisation missions are meant to be temporary and transitional, but actors have typically entered countries without a clear idea of how they will exit or what they will transition to. Where exit strategies do exist, they are usually designed *post hoc* in ways that are time bound or fixated on elections. Afghanistan again provides a stark example. A policy to strengthen central authority ahead of a sudden exit on a fixed date unravelled with terrible consequences. A safe exit clearly depends on improving the legitimacy and quality of the host state, not its mere presence. Whether or not people's peace needs are being met by the state and other governance actors should determine when international missions can leave safely. Stabilisation efforts will need to consider far more critically what legitimate state instruments, and which actors, should return in each location, and how, taking a people-centred approach into account as they do.⁸

4 In this report, 'theory of change' refers to assumptions and causal chains that explain why a particular way of working will yield a certain set of results. It is a practical approach widely used in conflict, governance, and peace settings to describe the logic that underpins interventions.

5 Skadkær Pedersen, F., Riis Andersen, L., Bonnet, C., Welham, K., (2019), 'Literature Review on the Stabilisation-Development Nexus', Tana Copenhagen.

6 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Report (2021), 'What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction', at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

7 al-Abdeh, M., Hauch, L. (2022), 'A new conflict management strategy for Syria,' Clingendael, at <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/new-conflict-management-strategy-syria>

8 van der Lijn, J., Glawion, T., de Zwaan, N. (2019), 'Towards Legitimate Stability in CAR and the DRC: External Assumptions and Local Perspectives,' SIPRI.

Designing and delivering more appropriate theories of change is made more difficult when actors do not work together as well as they could. Having a variety of *foci* can evenly disperse the burden of responsibility, but only if the *foci* add up to a coherent whole.⁹ Different operational languages, incentives, and staff structures can mean that development, diplomatic and defence actors¹⁰ working in a single country do not always integrate their approaches with each other, let alone with the host government, international partners, and conflict-affected citizens. In the absence of balanced civ-mil integration, stabilisation activities have been accused of being too quick to use hard security responses, which are better resourced and more readily available. This strategy has not worked, because securitised responses alone are unfit to address what are more often political, social or economic problems.¹¹ Embedded and empowered civilian advisors in military structures can improve the conflict sensitivity of military activities by prioritising political solutions over security-centric efforts. They contribute contextual knowledge, an understanding of conflict dynamics, overlooked analytical tools such as a gender lens, local contacts and networks, and a broader set of non-military skills.¹² Their participation can also foster better understanding between civilian and military actors, bridge silos, and reduce strategic and operational misunderstandings.

All this has meant that it has been challenging to set the correct scale of ambition for stabilisation efforts. A full state-building agenda has proved largely impossible, but narrow aims are also problematic. For example, elite settlements that are exclusive and fail to consider the conflict repercussions of their implementation can be precursors to a sterile, negative peace that may stymie immediate violence

but only at the cost of creating new risks of violence. This search for immediate stability can prevent much-needed social change from taking place and risks merely institutionalising and securitising conflict drivers. Indeed in many cases, arguably, stabilisation has suffered from elite capture, becoming predominantly a gravy train for narrow cliques of men in capitals who draw their power not from their relationship with the public, but from donors and their connections to the ever-growing security sector.¹³ The conflict insensitivity of this approach is evident wherever national elites, protected domestically by an expanded military and police force and internationally by donor partners, act in the name of stability but only really in ways that are detrimental to it in the long-run.¹⁴ When stabilisation becomes a conservative exercise in maintaining control rather than something emancipatory it is likely to produce a negative or illegitimate peace.

Another trend has emerged from this steady expansion and empowerment of the security sector in fragile areas: the appearance of a new cadre of military and security elites claiming to act 'on behalf of the people' enacting coups. Guinea and Mali are two of the latest examples. It is certainly difficult to balance securitisation and politically transformative work. However, a state that is unable to represent the political views and rights of all citizens cannot be considered stabilised, regardless of the force it wields. It is especially important to represent the lived experiences of women and other non-privileged groups, yet gender is rarely a primary concern in a field that can feel particularly masculine.

Despite the many hurdles, some stabilisation approaches have been relatively successful and could be replicated at scale. Where civilians are protected

9 Shah, H., Dalton, M., Yayboke, E., Staguhn, J. (2018), 'Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization: Lessons from beyond the Beltway,' Center for Strategic and International Studies.

10 Often called the '3D', development, defence and diplomatic actors are referred to in this paper as 'civilian and military' or 'civ-mil' actors.

11 Plank, P., Bergmann, J. (2021), 'The European Union as a Security Actor in the Sahel: Policy Entrapment in EU Foreign Policy', European Review of International Studies.

12 United States Department of State (2020), 'Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts To Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas'.

13 Cheng, C, Goodhand, J., Meehan, P. (2018), 'Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict', UK Stabilisation Unit.

14 Stritzel, H., Chang, S. (2015), 'Securitization and Counter-Securitization in Afghanistan', Volume 46, issue 6, pp. 548-567; Zimmerman, S. (2022), 'The Wagner Group is Bad News for Mali's Citizens and Its Stability', Australian Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-wagner-group-is-bad-news-for-malis-citizens-and-its-stability/>.

and their rights upheld, stabilisation outcomes are more meaningful and lasting.¹⁵ Outcomes are also better when inclusive and legitimate political agendas and processes are supported, even if the immediate political risks appear higher.¹⁶ Such processes include holding more considered dialogues with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) that enjoy popular support,¹⁷ have political legitimacy, and can be trusted peace partners.¹⁸ Conversely, security approaches that aim simply to eliminate NSAGs without addressing the structural causes behind their creation have not led to stability. When protection, rights and inclusion are not prioritised, stabilisation efforts have regularly produced unrepresentative governance regimes, and short-term but ultimately negative forms of peace.¹⁹ These unravel over time, leading to new cycles of violence as competition for a more inclusive political settlement starts anew. Principled and brave national, international and local leadership is vital if different parties to conflict are to support a collective vision for inclusive peace and stability.

What these lessons indicate is that it is not a question of whether to rethink stability, but how. One temptation may be to fall back on tweaking known approaches. This would be the wrong response. Now is not the moment to simply conduct largely unchanged stabilisation efforts albeit with a *bit* more conflict sensitivity, political nous, or slightly better integration of different ‘nexus’ actors. Such tactical improvements ought to be made, but they constitute the bare minimum of what needs to be rethought. Instead, building on what has been learned from the failure in Afghanistan and French withdrawal from Mali, those in the stabilisation field need to answer unequivocally more fundamental questions: “What are stabilisation activities supposed to achieve? For whom? And how?” For it is vague and often competing responses to these questions that undermine both the strategic and operational coherence of stabilisation efforts and with it the quality of outcomes that people experience.

Given that the field is so divided, the best way to start answering those questions may be to identify and build upon what actors can agree on. The project found that stabilisation actors agreed the following three points:

1. Stabilisation activities ought to improve the stability and peace of communities experiencing active armed conflict.
2. Stabilisation is fundamentally a political process, and cannot be reduced to a security issue, or even a ‘security first’ issue. Stabilisation cannot be achieved, bought, or propped up by security arrangements: it presumes the emergence of a positive, inclusive peace.
3. Stabilisation activities should be temporary and transitional in nature, intended to bring about the **Peace Conditions** necessary for longer-term, self-sustaining stability, so that international actors can transition away from securitised roles and other functions that should be the preserve of host governments.

The introduction of peace conditions alongside an explicit focus on positive peace are two important findings of the *Rethinking Stability* initiative, marking a subtle but important reframing of what genuine stability entails. When seeking ways forward during this project, the team encountered a fair amount of hand wringing, exasperation, reluctance to change, and criticism of other actors. Defining and working towards local and national peace conditions may be able to cut through these responses, establishing a strategic vision centred on understanding and responding to the deep political and social challenges that drive instability in each context. Working towards clearly articulated peace conditions would also help disparate actors reorientate their multiple strategies and activities around a more coherent and promising common focus.

15 Rottman, P. (2014), ‘Stabilization: Doctrine, Organization and Practice’, GPPi, <https://www.gppi.net/2014/03/01/stabilization-doctrine-organization-and-practice>

16 Street, J., Attree, L. (2022), ‘No Shortcuts to Security’, Saferworld, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1389-no-shortcuts-to-security>.

17 Koné, H. Moderan, O. (2022), ‘Dialogue with jihadists: Mauritania offers lessons for the Sahel’, ISS Africa, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/dialogue-with-jihadists-mauritania-offers-lessons-for-the-sahel>.

18 Bahiss, I., Jackson, A., Mayhew, L., Weigand, F., ‘Rethinking armed group control - Towards a new conceptual framework’, ODI Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/FINAL_Re-thinking_Armed_Group_Control.pdf.

19 What Swart called ‘No War, No Peace’. See Swart, G (2011), ‘A Vanquished Peace? The Success and Failure of Conflict Mediation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’, Southern African Peace and Security Studies.

Stabilisation is often criticised for being something that is ‘done’ to people. But identifying and working towards peace conditions in an inclusive and consultative manner would locate stabilisation efforts much closer to the people who experience them, and who will remain long after international actors depart. The recommendations in Section Four set out actionable proposals that suggest how different actors could work towards such conditions, and in doing so contribute to a more positive, emancipatory vision of stability.

Rethinking Stability will evidently not be the last word on stabilisation, and at the back of the paper we set out some questions for further research that were beyond the scope of the project. However, we hope that in a small way these findings and recommendations will help to reframe stabilisation and focus discussion and future efforts squarely on what has too often been a secondary consideration: achieving inclusive and sustainable peace for people living in conflict affected environments. So we end with a challenge: to locate yourself in the systems that drive stabilisation efforts and, regardless of your role, discern what improvements you can make to better understand and realise peace conditions in every context.

3. Key Findings

The experiences from twenty years of trial and error stabilisation interventions in Iraq, Mali, DRC, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere will significantly shape future efforts. If we are to meaningfully rethink, redo and improve the ways in which stabilisation activities are conducted, it is critical to draw the correct lessons from these experiences. This chapter captures the most important findings of the *Rethinking Stability* initiative, which are based on five private dialogues with stabilisation actors, policymakers, experts, and conflict affected citizens, as well

as desk research, on-the-ground research in Mali, and consultations and interviews with over one thousand people working in the field over the course of two years. The key findings are organised in eight work areas: definition and strategic scope; theories of change; exit strategies; integrated approaches; protection of civilians; local ownership of stabilisation activities; security and justice; and learning and adaptation. Section Four sets out actionable recommendations in light of the findings.

I. Definition and strategic scope



1. When those involved speak of stabilisation, they tend to describe at least three different things. First, they refer to the large multilateral missions established by the UN, EU, AU and other large institutions to respond to conflict and fragility. Second, they refer to the spectrum of kinetic, developmental, diplomatic, and humanitarian practices developed by a great variety of actors in their efforts to reduce and end violence. Third, they refer to stabilisation as an instrument of foreign policy, deployed by states to advance or protect national interests.
2. The conceptual ambiguity that surrounds the idea of stabilisation (what it is, who should be doing it, and how) has generated competing priorities among humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, and security actors, and also donors. Whilst in principle they appreciate the term’s

flexibility, in practice its ambiguity impedes the development of a clear, strategic and context specific vision of success around which international, local and national actors can coalesce.

3. As stabilisation has ballooned as a term and field of practice, efforts have been asked to achieve too much, too quickly, without sufficient focus. It would be beneficial to reconsider critically which activities and outcomes lie properly within the purview of stabilisation strategies, and which could be advanced more effectively if they were integrated and coordinated by complementary fields.
4. Strategic inflexibility prevents programmes from adjusting to changing contexts and needs. It can and does affect country as well as head-quarter staff, as well as the relationship between the two, with frequent gaps exist in understanding, information and communication
5. Limited or infrequent context analysis means strategies are often designed and updated without full appreciation of conflict dynamics. In Afghanistan, for example, just 0.8% (\$37,600,000) of the US stabilisation budget between 2002 and 2017 was allocated to independent analysis of the local political economy.²⁰ When analyses have been commissioned, their findings have not always been incorporated in actual decision making processes.
6. Forms of stability that lack public legitimacy require coercion to survive. Although stabilisation actors recognise this, intervention strategies consistently adopt one or two year planning timelines that are too short to build the foundations of an inclusive and lasting peace. Long-term strategies that promote political inclusion and rebuild social contracts need to be prioritised.
7. Stabilisation is a hotly contested area of ideational struggle that can put communities in competition with their elites, international actors, and each other. Decolonisation collides with neoliberalism, democracy with authoritarianism, sovereignty with self-determination. This helps to explain why current stabilisation efforts have found it hard to live up to their original aims.²¹ There is a growing tension between traditionally western/northern approaches to stabilisation and more emancipatory visions and practices. Strategies will need to accommodate to a much greater extent citizens' demands for justice, human rights and inclusion, as well as more opportunities to enjoy safer and more prosperous lives.
8. The immutable strategic ambition of western liberal peace orthodoxy has fallen away in recent years. Being respectful, realistic and contextual is welcome, but it cannot come at the expense of commitments to democracy and human rights. Even when it keeps a temporary lid on chaos, stabilisation must not provide a pretext for autocracy.
9. Conditions in some places raise major doubts as to the possibility of meaningful stabilisation in its current guise, or its appropriateness. At the time of writing, for example, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is not in full cooperation with its host state, enjoys limited freedom of movement since Barkhane withdrew, struggles to implement its mandate, and operates under conditions that put at risk the safety of its peacekeepers.²²

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

21 Richmond, O. (2021), 'The international peace architecture: A grand but flawed design for peacemaking', EUROPP, LSE, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/07/20/the-international-peace-architecture-a-grand-but-flawed-design-for-peacemaking/>.

22 International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report (2022), 'Prioritizing and Sequencing Security Council Mandates in 2022: The Case of MINUSMA'.

II. Theories of change



1. The dominant theories of change that have underpinned stabilisation activities have not led to stability. One, that the return of the state would catalyse peace, has proved to be too reductive. The introduction of hybrid and plural approaches that embrace non-linear change is welcome but complicated by the international imposition of governance models that are typically state-centric.²³ The solution to this tension is not simple or obvious; but current practice is not the solution either. Moves to restore central authority without ensuring inclusion and popular legitimacy have increased, not reduced instability. Stabilisation efforts will need theories, systems and staff able to consider far more critically what elements of the state, and which state personnel, should be restored in each location if they are to be conflict sensitive and people-centred.
2. Theories of change that start by prioritising stabilisation in the most insecure areas appear to be falsifiable. Experience has shown that challenges typical of the most insecure areas will not be solved quickly, and that rushing to these 'hotter' places first can merely displace or exacerbate violence and instability rather than address it.
3. Theories that military stabilisation activities are a necessary precursor of stability have not played out as anticipated. As news of illegal practices during kill and capture raids emerge from Afghanistan,²⁴ the failure of counter-terror efforts become clear in Mali,²⁵ and it is recognised that peace took root in places like Colombia when proscribed groups were included in political discussions,²⁶ it is evident that attempting to simply crush groups and individuals militarily more often generates blowback that can stall genuine reconciliation and stability.²⁷
4. Superior conventional forces may win firefights, but struggle to hold ground, win the ideational battles, or defeat the asymmetric and unconventional tactics of a dispersed adversary with a political agenda. If they have no political stake in peace and stability, non-state armed groups typically withdraw and reorganise, often over borders and beyond the reach of a conventional forces' mandate, triggering cycles of terror and counter-terror that are difficult to break.²⁸

23 Day, A., Hunt, C.T. (2020), 'UN Stabilisation Operations and the Problem of Non-Linear Change: A Relational Approach to Intervening in Governance Ecosystems', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 9(1).

24 'SAS unit repeatedly killed Afghan detainees, BBC finds', last accessed 12 July 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-62083196>.

25 D'Amato, S., Baldaro, R., (2022), 'Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions,' International Centre for Counter Terrorism, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-politics-of-counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-how-political-tensions-are-impacting-the-fight-against-terrorism/>

26 Street, J., Attree, L. (2022), 'No Shortcuts to Security', Saferworld, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1389-no-shortcuts-to-security>.

27 Reeve, R., Pelter, Z. (2014), 'From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel-Sahara', Remote Control Project, Oxford Research Group.

28 Karlsrud, J. (2019), 'From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism', *International Peacekeeping*, 26:1, pp. 1-21, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13533312.2018.1502040>.

III. Exit strategies



1. Actors agree on the temporal and transitional nature of stabilisation activities, but not how to implement them in practice. Fragmented aims and approaches hamstring efforts to integrate, and can lead multilateral missions in particular to list and linger, hindering a safe drawdown and ultimately an international exit. Indeed, international actors have typically entered countries without a clear idea of how or when they will exit, or how they will know when it is safe to leave.
2. Exit strategies emerge *post hoc* in ways that are time bound, rather than guided by the progressive realisation of national peace conditions, which would provide sounder indicators for judging when and how to exit.
3. Too often exit strategies are simply tied to the practice of holding elections as a marker of restored political sovereignty. Yet experience shows that restoring central authority and supporting the state's return to contested areas (or sometimes its first arrival, as in northern Mali) have not been sufficient to permit a peaceful exit. What matters is the legitimacy and quality of the state, not its mere presence.
4. A successful exit has technical aspects but depends above all on finding political solutions. Decisions to exclude non-state armed groups from political settlements when a section of the society considers them legitimate political actors are therefore likely to prolong instability and undermine the chances of a peaceful exit.²⁹
5. For host state officials, ensuring their own political survival often determines their choice of international partner and their support for stabilisation interventions. This in part explains why Malian officials turned to Wagner as French support for the current regime cooled.
6. Multilateral missions, too, can be instrumentalised and used to prop up state security. In many cases the multilateral norm “consent of the parties” means little more than “consent of the host state”. Yet the consent of the public, and public opinion, clearly matter when it comes to maintaining support for stabilisation activities. A focus on national security muddies the waters with regard to departure. It tends to jeopardise the perceived impartiality of missions, and shrinks what little space there is to go beyond regime protection and support the emergence of peace conditions across society as a whole.

29 Felbab-Brown, V. (2022), 'Nonstate armed actors in 2022: Alive and powerful in the new geopolitics', Order from Chaos, Brookings Institution, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/01/nonstate-armed-actors-in-2022-alive-and-powerful-in-the-new-geopolitics/>.

IV. Integrated approaches

1. The Global Fragility Act in the USA, the UK's Integrated Review, and new joint civil-military approaches such as the UNDP Stabilisation Facilities in the Lake Chad Basin and Liptako-Gourma, signal a welcome shared willingness to develop more flexible, comprehensive, and integrated approaches to stabilisation that work across the nexus.
2. Integrated civilian-military stabilisation efforts are vital in violent and fragile contexts. In their absence, stabilisation activities have been accused of turning to more readily available hard security responses. Securitised responses alone appear unfit to resolve problems that in reality are always political, social or economic. For instance, the return of the M23 to eastern DRC is a stark illustration that even the most robust stabilisation efforts cannot bring peace without a comprehensive political process.³⁰
3. Adequate civilian staffing, clear communication, and purposeful division and complementarity of labour between the civilian and military sides of the house can encourage more integrated approaches. Similarly, embracing multi-disciplinary methodologies, hybrid institutional arrangements, cross-trainings, and not just information sharing but shared *use* of information through joint planning and implementation, can all help to keep transaction costs low and incentivise integration.
4. Brave leadership and robust oversight of operational procedures go a long way. Civilian and military department and sectoral leads who are willing to consult across the aisle contribute to better stabilisation work and better outcomes for people in conflict affected areas. Fully integrated structures bridge silos and reduce misunderstanding.
5. In particular, embedded and empowered civilian advisors in military structures can improve the conflict sensitivity of military activities. They can focus efforts on clear political objectives, contribute contextual knowledge, relationships with local contacts, and understanding of conflict dynamics, apply an (often absent) gender lens, and bring to bear broad non-military skills, such as conflict mediation, reconciliation, and prevention.
6. An imbalance in budgets and staffing levels means that, as things stand, civilian staff cannot compete with the military. In Afghanistan, for example, a brigade of 10,000 troops often had a single civilian US State Department official at its headquarters, who was 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 genuine veto power, unlike the military commander. Instead of being valued operational stabilisation partners, these imbalances meant that civilian officials merely resembled advisors to the military.³¹
7. Far more openness to civilian oversight of security forces is required. More resources should be devoted to civil-military training too, so that security personnel understand that exchanging information with civilian advisors and with civilians can protect them and improve the likelihood of mission success. Unless security actors fully understand the benefits of listening to civilian actors, they will continue to view civil-military coordination as a chore.³² Indeed, as a former UN SRSG and General told the *Rethinking Stability* project team: "Everyone wants coordination but no one wants to be coordinated".

30 Russo, J. (2021), 'Militarised peacekeeping: lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo', *Third World Quarterly*, 42:12, pp. 3070-3086.

31 Young, D., Bennett, W., Vinci, R. (2022), 'Challenges and Opportunities in the Current Stabilisation Landscape: the Case for Rethinking Stability', *Interpeace*, p. 20.

32 Baumann, A. (2012), 'Silver Bullet or Time Suck? Revisiting the Role of Interagency Coordination in Complex Operations', *A Journal of the Center For Complex Operations, PRISM* 3, no. 3.

V. Protection of civilians



1. Despite their stated intentions, interventions by peace enforcement components of stabilisation interventions regularly cause increased violence against civilians. The effect may be indirect, as a result of blowback by targeted and resilient armed groups, for example; or direct, following kinetic actions such as counter-terror operations, which have subsumed the Protection of Civilians agenda in many places.³³ Both comprehensively erode trust in broader development and positive peace components connected to stabilisation work. In Mali, for example, violence emanating from Operation Barkhane undermined trust in MINUSMA despite being ‘separate’ from it. Where peace enforcement is required, it is ruinous for stability to lose sight of the protection agenda and the wider peace conditions to which it contributes. Actors and institutions that prioritise the protection of civilians are more trusted, used more by the public, and achieve better stabilisation outcomes. Conversely, when stabilisation activities and actors do not protect civilians first and foremost, they lose credibility with the public, which is not easily won back.³⁴
2. Most actors state that they support protection of civilians; but decisions are still regularly made that privilege under-performing or predatory military or government institutions to the detriment of civilians. When this occurs, international actors fall into the trap of believing that they are indirectly supporting civilians, when in fact they may be contributing to a worsening environment.
3. Beyond physical protection, people need to see that authorities are held accountable when violence against civilians occurs, whoever is the perpetrator; and to know that systems will provide redress should they become victims. These guarantees are vital to the creation of political trust and faith in stabilisation processes.³⁵
4. The protection of civilians agenda is an important point of reference for integrating the work of stabilisation actors, including joint or shared analysis of what causes violent incidents involving civilians. Resilience is potentially the connecting issue here: like a fuller and non-securitised protection of civilians approach, resilience involves social, institutional, environmental, and financial factors that collectively give people the tools to protect themselves.³⁶
5. In line with the objective to improve communities’ relations vertically with the state and horizontally with each other, future protection agendas need to understand better how to deploy networked approaches that restore connections between different communities and increase flows of people, goods, information, trade, aid, and investment.³⁷

33 Gallagher, A., Hunt, C.T., Lawrinson, B. (2022), ‘One Crisis, Multiple Norms: Strengthening Human Protection in Mali and the Sahel’, International Peace Institute (IPI).

34 The People’s Coalition for the Sahel (2021). ‘The Sahel: What Needs to Change. Towards A New People-Centred Approach’, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f524b4f15baeb6e140e38fc/t/6177aeaba7f5340e622d151e/1635234425006/SAHEL-REPORT-VA-HighRes.pdf>.

35 Centre for Civilians in Conflict (2022), “Toolkit: Advancing the Protection of Civilians in Conflict. Measuring Actions and Developing Best Practices to Protect Civilians” <https://civiliansinconflict.org/tools/toolkit-advancing-protection-of-civilians-in-conflict/>

36 Chandler, D. (2015), ‘Rethinking the Conflict-Poverty Nexus: From Securitized Intervention to Resilience. Stability’, *International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), p. 13.

37 al-Abdeh, M., Hauch, L. (2022), ‘A new conflict management strategy for Syria,’ Clingendael, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/new-conflict-management-strategy-syria>.

VI. Local ownership of stabilisation activities

1. Working with and through willing and legitimate local partners is fundamental to successful stabilisation work. Interventions that are externally driven and led, and that do not foster political inclusion, typically fail to gain traction, as seen in Afghanistan. Stabilisation efforts can also get stuck in capital cities and captured by elites, which impedes fuller consultation processes as well as decentralised ownership of stabilisation activities. If peace and stability are to hold, achieving public consent is at least as important, or more important, than securing elite agreements.³⁸
2. At present, the counter-terror elements of stabilisation efforts distort opportunities to build local ownership. As counter-terror infrastructures and mandates depend on maintaining relationships with national governments and the status of forces agreements, national elites in capitals often become the *de facto* 'local' partners, rather than conflict affected populations. This approach has strengthened and securitised a number of undemocratic and even authoritarian regimes, undermining progress towards lasting stability.³⁹
3. Stabilisation actors, and missions in particular, provide many services that should ultimately be provided by the host government. This creates a dilemma for missions that want to provide services to citizens, but want to do so without creating dependency. Communities also face a dilemma: if stabilisation actors do not strengthen local ownership or shift power to conflict affected populations, the latter may not want an unending international presence but may fear the material consequences of their departure.
4. International actors will struggle to build relationships of trust with communities unless they devolve decision-making towards those who are affected most by stabilisation interventions. Further, communities are unlikely to take consultation processes seriously unless their advice is heeded and visible changes follow. Stabilisation activities are likely to take root when they improve relations with the 'owners of peace'.
5. Youth constitute significant proportions of the population in many unstable areas. It is a common misperception that they are a problem or source of violence, but the opposite is true.⁴⁰ Failure to include them in political settlements can narrow peaceful pathways for change. Similarly, excluding women from decision making processes undermines prospects of inclusive local ownership. Including women and youth in activities makes it more likely that stabilisation efforts will be inclusive and will last and therefore transform harmful societal and gender norms in the long run.

38 Kleinfeld, R., Barham, E. (2018), 'Complicit States and the Governing Strategy of Privilege Violence: When Weakness Is Not the Problem', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2018, 21:1, pp. 215-238.

39 Soto-Mayor, G., (2022), 'Djihadistes en Afrique: des hors-la-loi sans religion?' *le Grand Continent*, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2022/05/27/djihadistes-en-afrique-des-hors-la-loi-sans-religion/>; and Interview with Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, director of Research at the Centre National de recherche Scientifique (CNRS), 'France in the Sahel: "It is a failure, Operation Barkhane could not stem the jihadist advance"', at <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/invit%C3%A9-afrique/20220715-france-au-sahel-c-est-un-%C3%A9chec-l-op%C3%A9ration-barkhane-n-a-pas-pu-endiguer-la-progression-jihadiste>.

40 Simpson, G. (2018), 'The missing peace: independent progress study on youth, peace and security' UNFPA, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/384661?ln=en>.

VII. Security and justice

1. Widespread insecurity is typical of stabilisation environments, making it difficult for diplomatic and development actors to operate safely. However, the ‘security first’ model, which applies strictly sequenced steps to prepare the way for developmental and peacebuilding work (mirroring the ‘take, hold, build’ mantra of kinetic stabilisation activities), falls short. Achieving a balance between work that securitises and work that politically transforms is a central challenge; but security sector governance reforms should not be undertaken without commensurate efforts to improve the quality and legitimacy of overall governance.
2. Experience has shown time and again that when stabilisation is reliant on security arrangements it will not lead to positive, inclusive peace. It is therefore essential to work deliberately and forensically to understand the social and political peace conditions that security and justice reforms require. Explicitly foregrounding the attainment of peace conditions can help security and justice actors to focus their strategies and activities on removing the drivers rather than the symptoms of conflict.
3. It is clear that a state unable to provide security and justice for all its population without discrimination cannot be considered stabilised. Similarly, state or international security actors who use security and justice instruments to perpetrate violence against civilians in the interest of short-term ‘stability’ should not be supported.
4. Upholding human rights principles in the sector is vital. Thorough accountability mechanisms can prevent and redress abuses. However, such mechanisms should be designed and resourced in ways that ensure they can survive after any draw-down in international oversight and support.⁴¹
5. Most stabilisation actors support the emergence of a stable state; but a statist approach to security and justice is not always possible. Non-state armed groups regularly provide both security and justice and enjoy varying levels of popular support in unstable contexts, even as they compete with the state for legitimacy.⁴² However, it has typically proved difficult for stabilisation actors to work with non-state armed groups considered ineligible to participate in political solutions at track 1 level. These groups regularly provoke governments and international actors into over-reacting in the name of stability, without actually delivering better security and justice outcomes. Sectoral shortcomings include scant analysis and understanding of how parallel governance structures intersect, broad neglect of the gender dimensions of conflict, and short-term violent strategies.⁴³
6. Justice is vital for stability. However justice is not something that is merely dispensed through criminal and legal mechanisms, but rather experienced either positively or negatively in people’s daily lives. Negative experiences are primary causes of grievance and instability. Attempts to redress injustices can create tensions between customary and national justice systems. However, creative hybrid approaches have helped national and customary justice systems and actors complement each other through gap analysis, capacity development, technical assistance, operational partnerships, knowledge sharing and system building.⁴⁴ Hybridity is important in unstable environments because, whilst customary

41 Spink, L. (2018), ‘Protection with Less Presence: How the Peacekeeping Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo is Attempting to Deliver Protection with Fewer Resources’, Centre for Civilians in Conflict, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/BaseClosurePrint_Web.pdf.

42 Mooney, L., Quirk, P. (2022), ‘Toward a Framework for Transatlantic Cooperation on Non-State Armed Groups’, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/05/Toward_a_Framework_for_Transatlantic_Cooperation_on_Non-State_Armed_Groups.pdf.

43 Attree, L. (2022), ‘Function before form: optimising the UN’s counter-terrorism architecture - Independent expert assessment prepared for the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-terrorism’, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1396-function-before-form>.

44 Llorente, M.V. (2015), ‘From War to Peace: Security and the Stabilization of Colombia,’ *Stability International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), p. 47; UNDP (2020), ‘Justice Sector Stabilization: Guinea-Bissau, Final Report’, <https://www.undp.org/guinea-bissau/projects/justice-sector-stabilization>.

justice systems can have serious procedural and normative flaws, they are also deeply entrenched and well-understood mechanisms of community resilience. Hurrying to displace them with less fa-

miliar, poorly performing, or untrusted formal justice mechanisms can further destabilise communities, depriving them of functional dispute resolution mechanisms when they need them most.

VIII. Learning and adaptation



1. It is extremely challenging to monitor and evaluate stabilisation programmes accurately in active conflict with restricted access and mobility. Few actors succeed in doing the rigorous and iterative monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) that is necessary to remain responsive and adaptive.
2. Even when monitoring and evaluation (M&E) does take place, it is more common to monitor outputs or process indicators than to evaluate outcomes and assess the true impact of stabilisation activities. As a result, strategies and programmes may be ill-informed, may focus on low-hanging fruit rather than the trickier but more important work of political transformation, or forego critical analysis, learning and adaptation. In the absence of MEL, however, actors may continue to follow institutional routines and set strategic aims that are no longer appropriate, missing chances to respond in better ways at opportune moments, and even be more conflict insensitive.
3. In addition to in-country challenges, political and bureaucratic barriers impede meaningful MEL. Pressure from headquarters to declare that stabilisation objectives have been achieved can create disingenuous reporting cultures that discourage honest admissions of failure. When these obstruct learning, stabilisation activities can travel far down the wrong path.
4. Evaluations prepared in advance of multilateral mandate renewals have not reorientated missions sufficiently to adapt to changes in their complex operational environments. Annual mandate cycles, the political dynamics of the UN Security Council,⁴⁵ and the general reluctance of host governments to acknowledge when situations are deteriorating, can hamstring effective learning and improvement.
5. No standardised measures of stabilisation or stabilisation activities have been agreed. This flexibility can be useful, but comes at a cost. It becomes difficult to compare outcomes across activities, or measure changes that are attributable to stabilisation efforts. As such, seeing how multiple efforts are adding up to a coherent experience of 'stability' remains elusive. The general absence of agreed national peace and stabilisation frameworks also makes it difficult for the public to either know what is meant to be happening, or subsequently hold actors accountable for their actions.
6. Emphasising the quality rather than the quantity of projects can improve stabilisation results. Twenty years of stabilisation lessons from numerous missions and interventions make clear that a volume mentality is often destructive, and that overheads and precision are not stabilisation liabilities, but assets to be cherished.

⁴⁵ Curran, D., Holtom, P. (2015), 'Resonating, Rejecting, Reinterpreting: Mapping the Stabilization Discourse in the United Nations Security Council, 2000-14', *Stability International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), p. 50.

4. Actionable recommendations

The above findings indicate significant problems for a field that is perhaps slightly lost. The defeat in Afghanistan has fuelled worries that other places may go the same way. Stabilisation interventions were expected to be temporary, but international actors have struggled to bring about the political transformations necessary to needed to transition away from kinetic operations and exit safely after achieving a sustainable peace. The work has also been made harder by the evolution of geopolitical contestation, with the return of great power politics in places such as Mali, Central African Republic, and Ukraine bringing conflicts in those countries into sharper and more dangerous focus. Indeed, as conflict levels rise globally,⁴⁶ it is important not only to learn the right lessons from past interventions, but to prepare for a more complex and divisive global future in which new threats are emerging. How prepared are stabilisation actors to address the conflict repercussions of climate change in already unstable areas? Or to address multidimensional crises where, for example, inequitable vaccine distribution or access to health services may prompt mass migrations? How equipped are they to address acute demographic trends? This is a significant question in places such as the Central African Republic where youth represent approximately 60% of the population, or Mali where over half the population are children.

For those working on stabilisation who will have to grapple with these issues in the near future, the answers cannot be framed around the same logic of securitisation that has defined the past. Instead the challenge will be to describe, with much more clarity, how stabilisation activities will contribute to the development of genuinely inclusive political processes able to improve governance, and construct

systems, networks and institutions necessary to recognise and respond to the real grievances behind people's instability.

It is towards such an approach that the recommendations below are directed. They are split between the three key work areas of strategic planning, operations, and learning & adaptation, and are signposted towards four main categories of stabilisation actors: host governments; multilateral institutions; donors; and civil society. The central recommendation that ties the findings together is that all future work should be recalibrated to focus on understanding and creating the social, political and economic conditions that conflict affected populations themselves consider necessary for peace and stability. We have called these **Peace Conditions**.

Defining peace conditions marks an important reframing of what transitions are necessary for genuine stability to emerge. Reaching an agreed understanding of peace conditions at local, national, and regional level will situate the locus of stabilisation work where it belongs, with the citizens who experience it and who will remain long after international actors have departed. Working to meet peace conditions will also encourage more coherent stabilisation efforts that are focused on the genuine drivers of instability in each context.

Realising peace conditions will certainly require smarter policies, practices and resource use, and some of the recommendations address this. However, as a field, the larger challenge will be to change our stabilisation mindsets and the habits of thought that have brought us to where we are. Some may find this aspiration, and perhaps the very notion of peace

46 Davies, S., Pettersson, T., Öberg, M. (2022), 'Organized violence 1989–2021 and drone warfare', *Journal of Peace Research*.



conditions, naïve. Yet, as current stabilisation efforts stall and ambitions narrow,⁴⁷ any serious effort to *Rethinking Stability* obliges us to decide what we need to improve both as individuals and institutions to make sure that future efforts are a wholesale improvement on how we currently operate. This document cannot provide all the tools to start that process of introspection and change. Nevertheless, in association with normative frameworks that are emerg-

ing in the peacebuilding space, such as the nexus approach,⁴⁸ UN Resilience Guidance,⁴⁹ and Principles for Peace,⁵⁰ we hope that it contains useful ideas that each of us can use to improve outcomes for citizens living in conflict-affected environments.

47 Brookings (2022), 'Assessing UN state-building in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and beyond'.

48 Veron. P., Hauck, V. (2021), 'Connecting the pieces of the puzzle: The EU's implementation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus', ECDPM Discussion Paper 301.

49 UN Common Guidance on Helping Build Resilient Societies (2020), <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/UN-Resilience-Guidance-Final-Sept.pdf>.

50 Principles for Peace, <https://principlesforpeace.org/>.

Move strategic design processes from donor capitals and multilateral headquarters, and call on the expertise of more national and sub-national stakeholders. Regional offices, sub-national experts, CSO partners, and communities can provide more up-to-date information and accurate analysis about highly volatile settings. Involve them as early as possible to improve the likelihood that they feel ownership of and will support the strategies that emerge.



Maximise use of legitimate and trusted coordination forums, such as the Stabilization Leaders Forum, to discuss progress towards peace conditions, plan operational burden sharing, and react to emerging multidimensional stabilisation challenges.



Break the institutional impasse around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus by jointly developing strategic workplans framed around the realisation of peace conditions. Strategies must veer away from being conflict blind, over reliant on hard security approaches, dislocated from local contexts, systems and needs, and unable to harness the locally embedded and trust enhancing approaches of peacebuilders, humanitarians and development actors.



To improve integrated operations, embrace multi-disciplinary methodologies, cross-trainings to develop 'trilingualism' across the 3Ds (diplomacy, development, defence), regular secondments, and hiring practices that permit integration of staff with cross-sectoral backgrounds. Practice not just information sharing, but its collective application through joint planning and implementation, including hybrid institutional arrangements that ensure civilian-led efforts complement military activities. Embed and empower civilian advisors in stabilisation missions to help overcome the numerical and budgetary disadvantages they face by comparison with their military counterparts.



Support social movements that can coalesce around locally owned and locally driven non-violent political responses to instability. This will improve public ownership of stabilisation efforts, reassure communities that the near future is something to be collectively built and protected, and dissuade people from using violence to achieve change.



Prioritise efforts to address governance rather than security deficits by means of a concerted process of reconciliation. Kinetic efforts should be minimal, always in the service of clear political goals, and complemented by development and diplomatic efforts to address the underlying causes of instability. Engage in more dialogues with citizens, but also with non-state armed groups that support peace, so that governance deficits are resolved ahead of or at least alongside security ones.⁵⁴ Support subsidiarity and prioritise governance reforms that will deliver the social services deemed most important for peace in each location.



Do not fixate on the 'return of the state' – design theories of change that describe how activities will solve the real problems driving instability and move towards the realisation of peace conditions. Theories should not privilege a state authority discourse, but instead improve trust, resilience and the social contracts at the core of any positive peace.⁵² This may include more support for hybrid governance solutions that are embedded enough to address localised sources of social instability.



Be honest about the values and interests driving stabilisation efforts so they can be understood and critiqued at face value. To give an example, an unspoken aim of some EU and donor stabilisation strategies is to prevent migration and refugee flows from unstable regions. However, without stating this, actors are likely to be at cross-purposes when designing strategies. A refocus on peace conditions could help all parties. If migration really is the motive driving stabilisation, the only just and sustainable solution is to support peace conditions that will improve people's lives and encourage them to stay. Otherwise people will always migrate in search of better lives, and repressive regimes and hard borders will neither prevent them nor build stability.



Incentivise talented staff, financially or otherwise, to stay in post for as long as it takes to see projects completed successfully. Long-term staff retention develops dedicated civil officers with the skills, networks, and trust upon which successful stabilisation efforts depend.



Incentivise and improve the trustworthiness of elites when pursuing governance, rule of law, and security sector reforms. Operating to a code of values such as protecting human rights, preventing abuses, and inhibiting corruption improves elite trustworthiness. Citizens need to see elites behave fairly, make positive changes, communicate when things go well, and be accountable when they do not. The extent to which governance structures are trusted has significant bearing on peace prospects.⁵⁸



Coordinate communications, deliver key messages clearly with one voice, and explain why communities will benefit more if they support stabilisation activities that make progress towards peace conditions than if they support groups and individuals who may have an interest in prolonging conflict. Use coordinated communications to manage expectations about what stabilisation actors can and cannot realistically achieve for the public.⁵⁹



Ensure women have prominent roles in the design, implementation and ownership of stabilisation work. It is not just the presence of women that makes peace and stability outcomes more likely, but their meaningful leadership and inclusion.⁶³



Embed civil affairs officers, communications experts, and outreach staff to communicate to the public the strategic goals and approaches behind stabilisation efforts. At the same time, build feedback loops that will enable stabilisation actors to understand how their messages are received and adapt them as necessary.



When identifying pathways towards peace conditions, prioritise multiple year commitments over one-year mandates and quick impact projects.⁶⁰ Afghanistan was subjected to twenty one-year strategies instead of a congruous longer-term plan. No stabilisation effort run on a series of one-year mandates can hope to restore or construct a social contract necessary for peace. To give efforts time, direction and support necessary to succeed, design longer-term mandates that remove the need for time-consuming and uncertain renewal processes. Measuring progress against metrics attached to a set of national and sub-national peace conditions could form the basis for sanctioning rolling mandates.



Understand the multiple, varied and unique motivations of different NSAGs,⁵⁵ and bring proscribed groups back into political negotiations where they have local legitimacy and can play positive roles in peace efforts.⁵⁶ Hold discreet and informal political discussions if risk assessments indicate that these will be more beneficial than official processes. Keep dialogue going to help address the multiple micro problems that combine to create a general climate of instability.⁵⁷



Consolidate the resilience of relatively stable places before methodically building out in a considered manner towards more challenging areas. Addressing instability does not mean overlooking opportunities to prevent further conflict, with peacebuilding efforts returning USD 16 for every dollar spent.⁶⁰ Shoring up resilience in areas where violence might return builds public confidence that progress can be made in unstable contexts, especially if efforts are made to address deeper grievances such as land disputes and historical conflicts.⁶¹



Create political space for youth leadership in stabilisation activities. The inclusion of young people, coupled with sustained investment in their ownership and leadership, is indispensable to building and sustaining peace and stability.⁶² Their engagement is what it takes to translate the demographic dividend of youth populations into a peace dividend for unstable countries and regions. Young men and women must not be stereotyped as male aggressors or female victims of violence but understood in situ and depth, and supported to become the positive instigators and agents of peace that they are.



Peace Planning
 Peace Operations
 Learning & Adaptation

In situations where bilateral work might be politically risky or impossible, develop a costed and coherent One UN strategy that donors can fully support. Support UN Resident Coordinators, with political backing from headquarters, to devise a coherent 'One UN' plan able to unite different agencies behind understanding and achieving peace conditions. Include mechanisms for joint planning, analysis, and MEL.



Stabilisation is a political endeavour: ensure that strategic goals prioritise diplomatic solutions to instability. This requires strategic clarity about the trade-offs needed to achieve peace. For example, achieving a less than perfect political solution as early as possible can save lives, limit destruction, and preserve more of the social and economic networks that are important for post-conflict reconstruction. However, and all efforts must continue to shift the needle towards political inclusion and resolution, so that short-term pragmatism do not crystallise into new sources of grievance and further conflict.



Embed peace conditions in national peace and stability action plans to politically enshrine what has to be achieved and by whom, and help keep activities contextual, coordinated, relevant, and nationally owned. Where contexts are too unstable for national peace and stability action plans, local and regional plans should be applied until the situation improves. This specificity can help provide strategic guidance to smaller multilateral missions, which are becoming the norm.⁵¹



Draw on the expertise of those able to provide thorough and repeated political economy analyses of conflict drivers, actors, risks, entry points, and opportunities for successful stabilisation activities. Such analyses should form the basis of initial strategic discussions and subsequent plans (noting that no plan survives first contact with an operating environment).



Do not enter a stabilisation context without a responsible plan for transitioning out. Exit and transition plans will change over time. However an exit must not be tied to temporal deadlines or international political whims: decisions on when and how to transition away from stabilisation efforts should be made on the basis of progress towards realisation of defined peace conditions.



Convene different stabilisation stakeholders to collectively define sets of local and national peace conditions. Peace conditions are the changes that conflict affected populations themselves deem necessary for stability. A meticulously consultative process will increase the likelihood that peace conditions are locally and nationally owned and supported, provide a strategic framework to which all subsequent stabilisation activities adhere, and make it possible to develop qualitative indicators against which progress can be measured.



Stabilisation cannot remain a catchall for every activity happening in conflict affected areas; clearer labelling would help to delineate tasks within a strategy. Identifying specific peace conditions would indicate what social, economic, and political changes are needed, and allow for more appropriate allocations of actors to tasks. This would better harness the capacities of different nexus actors, incentivise more integrated approaches, and advance nationally owned frameworks that can hold different actors accountable for their work.



The significant gap between mandates and resources in multilateral missions should be closed. The UN Security Council and Fifth Committee should ensure that planned operations are resourced at a level that corresponds to their mandated tasks.



In fast moving conflicts that call for flexible and adaptable programmes, use iterative conflict analyses with timely MEL processes to help actors employ the right stabilisation tool at the right time and seize opportunities that present themselves. Decentralise decision making as much as possible to bring it closer to the location of stabilisation efforts, but ensure adept and communicative leadership along the chain of command. Embed measuring and monitoring peace conditions in existing structures such as the UN's Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System.⁶⁴



Ensure MEL leads participate in drafting peace conditions to guide the development of measures to track them. Their participation will ensure that MEL is not an afterthought, and that peace conditions and theories of change that support them are connected to a realistic MEL plan from the outset.



Make evaluation and learning, not just monitoring, a critical component of every stabilisation programme – without which it is impossible to know whether progress is being made. Allocate sufficient budget to carry out the highest quality MEL possible; train and incentivise partners; conduct third party MEL to complement in-house evaluations; and prioritise participatory efforts to ensure that those effected have a say in assessing outcomes. Where full MEL is not possible due to security concerns, consider the conflict sensitivity of implementing any stabilisation activities given that consequences, intended or otherwise, will remain unknown.



All actors must be honest in their reporting, especially regarding the precise reasons and circumstances contributing to the many likely failures. Managers must push back against pressure to demonstrate success and instead foster a culture of honesty, reflection and support. Only then can failures become learning moments rather than missed opportunities to improve.



If analysis repeatedly shows that an approach is having unintended negative consequences, stop it. Do not support processes that rely on routines, faith, endurance and optimism to paper over known cracks. Use MEL to discern improved approaches that are suited to the relevant stabilisation environment. Focus on the quality of stabilisation projects, not their number.



For donors

For host governments

For multilaterals

For civil society



- 50 Hegre, H., Hultman, L., Nygård, H.M. (2019), 'Evaluating the Conflict-Reducing Effect of UN Peacekeeping Operations', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 81, No. 1, January 2019.
- 51 Gowen, R. (2022), 'For U.N. Peacekeeping, Smaller Is Looking Better – Again', <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30655/on-peacekeeping-un-could-turn-to-a-cold-war-model>.
- 52 de Coning, C., Karlsrud, J., Troost, P. (2015), 'Towards More People-Centric Peace Operations: From "Extension of State Authority" to "Strengthening Inclusive State-Society Relations"', *Stability International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), p. 49.
- 54 Kleinfeld, P., Tapily, M. (2022), "'We accept to save our lives": How local dialogues with jihadists took root in Mali', *The New Humanitarian*.
- 55 European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel', https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/european_union#menuarea.
- 56 ICRC (2015), 'The applicability of IHL to terrorism and counterterrorism', <https://www.icrc.org/fr/node/14180>.
- 57 Mooney, L., Quirk, P. (2022), 'Toward a Framework for Transatlantic Cooperation on Non-State Armed Groups', https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/05/Toward_a_Framework_for_Transatlantic_Cooperation_on_Non-State_Armed_Groups.pdf.
- 58 Price, M., Warren, M. (2016), 'Reimagining SSR in Contexts of Security Pluralism', *Stability Journal*, <https://stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.555/print/>.
- 59 Vermeij, L., Bigwood, C., von Gienanth, T., Kumalo, L. (2022), 'UN Peacekeeping Operations at a Crossroads: The Implementation of Protection Mandates in Contested and Congested Spaces'.
- 60 Using 20 years of expenditures in Rwanda to establish a unit cost, the Institute for Economics and Peace estimates the cost-effectiveness ratio of peacebuilding at 1:16. See *Visions of Humanity (2020)*, 'Measuring Peacebuilding Cost-Effectiveness', <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/measuring-peacebuilding-cost-effectiveness/>.
- 61 Barrera, A. (2015), 'The Congo Trap: MONUSCO Islands of Stability in the Sea of Instability', *Stability International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1), p. 52.
- 62 Altiok, A. H., Grizelj, I. (2019), 'We Are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth-inclusive Peace Processes', New York: Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth.
- 63 Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiatives and UN Women (2016), 'Making Women Count – Not just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations', p. 5.
- 64 Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/cpas>

5. Questions for further research

1. How can stabilisation missions mandated to work in one country take account of regional and cross-border conflict drivers?
2. How can an eventual mission exit be planned and achieved in a constantly moving landscape, where there are numerous unknowns and the evolution of political institutions is characteristically unpredictable?
3. For conflict affected citizens, what does a desirable end state look like? What should be done when their expectations differ from those of national elites, the UN, or other international actors?
4. What trade-offs are acceptable, if any? Is it ever right, in the interests of short-term peace, to partner with actors who are responsible for structural violence? Does doing so make it more or less likely that they will become law-abiding and accountable in the long term?
5. How do mental health and psychosocial support programmes advance efforts to achieve long-term stability, establish peace conditions, and contribute to long-term prevention and resilience?
6. Has the multilateral norm for “consent of the parties” in stabilisation missions come to mean little more than consent of the host state? If so, what can be done to secure the consent of the public more broadly? What does this state of affairs say about whose opinions matter when it comes to maintaining consent for stabilisation activities?
7. How can successful local stabilisation efforts be scaled up to create momentum for positive change at sub-national and then national level? Is it even possible to do state-centric and human security work at the same time?
8. Is it possible to have a normative trajectory and an iterative process at the same time in stabilisation strategies and operations that are so large and unwieldy?
9. How will emerging issues, such as climate change, technological innovation, demographic trends, migration, and food insecurity, affect conflict environments and the scope, strategies and operations of stabilisation interventions?
10. How can national and international actors change their recruitment processes, so that the right people are appointed to cope with the multi-faceted demands of stabilisation work? How can institutions incentivise their staff to stay long enough to see projects successfully completed?
11. How will the re-emergence of great power geopolitics affect UN stabilisation missions, and what considerations should guide their future design, mandates, and implementation if they are to not be further politicised?
12. Conditions in some places raise doubts as to whether stabilisation efforts remain appropriate. At the time of writing, for example, MINUSMA is not in full cooperation with the host state, has limited freedom of movement since Barkhane withdrew, struggles to implement its mandate, and operates under conditions that put at risk the safety of its peacekeepers. What is the correct response in such situations?
13. Given the UN’s dwindling interest in more large-scale missions, how should stabilisation and peacekeeping missions be structured in the future?
14. Is stabilisation still the best approach available for conflict affected-areas? Does it offer the best lens for analysing problems? If not, what should replace it?



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