Stabilization Instruments Revisited:
Increasing the Likelihood of Positive Impact

International Workshop, Berlin, 19 October 2016

The ZIF workshop on stabilization instruments brought together stabilization planners from the European Union, the United Nations, the Governments of Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany and the US, as well as practitioners from peace operations in Mali (MINUSMA), Somalia (UNSOM), the DR Congo (MONUSCO), and peacebuilding experts from civil society organizations.

An overall insight of the workshop was that stabilization planners and implementers are well advised to make use of the lessons that peacebuilders have been learning over the past decades. The debate also generated four overarching takeaways:

1. **Stabilization is in essence a peacebuilding approach**. Stabilization should be understood as a specific contribution to peacebuilding in situations of imminent or escalating violent conflict. The strategic goal of stabilization is to support a political process that prevents or brings to an end such escalations of violence and creates the conditions for a sufficiently inclusive political settlement, which fosters sustainable peace in the long run.

2. **Politics is at the center of stabilization; instruments need to serve the political strategy**. Although all peacebuilding activities are ultimately political, in the case of stabilization politics are at the very heart of the effort. The appropriateness of stabilization instruments and activities must hence be measured against the yardstick of how far they effectively support a political strategy. On the other hand, this requires that key elements of a strategy need to be formulated and shared to serve as guidance.

3. **Primary and secondary goals of stabilization require a comprehensive approach**. The primary goal of stabilization is a political process as described above. Secondary goals are tangible peace dividends, generated by quickly satisfying the basic needs of populations affected by violent conflict. While diplomacy is crucial, stabilization can also require preventive or reactive measures of humanitarian, development, or security actors. A comprehensive approach can provide a joint understanding of goals and realistic theories of change, thus guiding a common effort and political coherence.

4. **Support instruments need to be flexible and responsive**. Stabilization activities can rarely be pursued in a linear manner and often need to be reset or recalibrated. In order to increase the likelihood of positive impact it is essential to analyze the changing context and the relevance of activities rigorously and to flexibly adapt the initial theory of change and the programs based on them. In many cases, the bottleneck is not money but a sensible design and a conflict-sensitive implementation of measures. Do-No-Harm-Checks should be applied at the policy and the program level.

In the following, the workshop conclusions are presented in more detail. They include the individual takeaways of the participants brought forward at the end of the workshop (see also picture 3).

Conceptual Clarity and Comprehensive Efforts

The need of a commonly accepted **definition and concept of stabilization** was highlighted throughout the workshop. Further clarification would also be required regarding the relationship between stabilization, peacebuilding and development, and how synergies can be created.

Stabilization was seen as an important **interim goal** to reduce the likelihood or existence of violent conflict. Rather than being a goal in itself, stabilization aims to create space for a political process in which sustainable peace and development goals can be pursued in a non-violent manner.

Stabilization programs therefore have to be understood as inherently political measures and need to be based on a **sound political strategy**. They can employ the use of multiple instruments that should address the key grievances for conflict and instability, in support of the political strategy.

Programs and stabilization programs should be designed as **conflict specific** as possible, so as to ensure the relevance of the measures to the actual conflict. Political narratives of stabilization should also become more context adequate. A flexible adaptation of measures is a key to success but requires open, **reflexive procedures and proper communication** channels between stakeholders.

Picture 1 – Setting the stage

While stabilization programs are often driven by short-term political demands, **long-term peace building needs and opportunities** should be firmly kept in mind. In fact, stabilization efforts need to deal with conflicting objectives: political demand and local needs for quick impact on the one hand, versus longer-term sustainability on the other.

Importantly, coherence needs to be fostered through a **comprehensive approach**. Important preconditions for comprehensive action are shared visions and theories of change. With a view not to get lost in day-to-day coordination, joint analysis and planning help to establish a consistent approach amongst stabilization actors. Certain means like pool funding, as well as political and donor alignment at home and on ground, could drive whole-of-government cooperation.

Theories of change should be seen less as a predictive power, but as frameworks. Dissenting views should be documented and revisited so as to reduce the likelihood of failure. A common vision has not only to be shared among implementing actors; even more essentially, it needs to be politically owned by national counterparts.

A key recommendation was to be **realistic** in what can be achieved, and to support clear and politically achievable objectives. In particular, the expectation needs to be countered that there are quick fixes if measures are quick and flexible. In fragile environments it must be politically accepted that activities can rarely be pursued in a linear manner and might need to be restarted at times.

Hence, it was also suggested that officials should create formats and procedures to clearly **present risks and uncertainties to policymakers** to better inform them and to facilitate decision-making.

Intervention Levels and Actors

Participants stressed that stabilization efforts should embrace complexity and use multiple tracks in dealing with conflict and instability. Modes of delivery matter.

Involving **local communities** at all stages of the programming cycle makes a difference. Some external interventions tend to focus on the sub-national level if a clear political strategy on the national level is missing. But while community-based projects can contribute to stabilization, political actors at upper levels also need to be engaged to **avoid the creation of a community vs. state elites logic**.

The necessity to understand the **root causes of conflict and the drivers of instability** on all levels (local, regional, national, and transnational) was emphasized. Accordingly, change-makers and spoilers need to be identified. Actor mapping was identified as a key tool, clarifying whom external actors are working with and why.

In addition, a **people centered approach** was regarded as crucial. Participants from the field and headquarters alike recommended to build collaborative relations with domestic society and to work with a more diverse set of actors, aiming to shape more just, more legitimate and more inclusive state institutions.

The **neglect of non-state armed groups** on the sub-national level was regarded as a primary source of violence and instability. A key question was how to address violent actors that follow ideological rather than public interests. Most participants agreed that it was important to engage such actors in a transactional relationship, bearing in mind that their major interest is to maintain power. Providing specific conflict actors with resources and equipment often fuels the conflict due to a loss of control over these resources afterwards.

Picture 2 - Searching for common ground

Stabilization should provide **incentives** to support a political process or legitimate political actors. **Handover planning** should from the outset be a part of stabilization programs, in particular where international players temporarily substitute government as a service provider.

Evaluation and Adaptation of Programs

An **evidence-based approach to stabilization** was broadly seen as an important success factor, and a larger investment in evaluation was a key recommendation. So far, evaluations often do not look sufficiently at the contribution of program activities to the overreaching stabilization goals. Further investment into different kinds of impact assessments is recommendable.

Quick reaction is essential not only in getting stabilization programs off the ground, but also to adapting them once shortcomings or negative impact have been identified. Regular impact assessments are important. Decentralizing decision-making powers for the implementation of stabilization programs, i.e. through creating management capacities in embassies and subnational offices, might foster responsiveness.

Implementing organizations have partly spent extensive effort on data collection with high-end information systems, but fall short of the aspiration to **analyze, evaluate and present** data in a way that supports policy decisions. In this area, joining efforts across and within organization to discuss and synthesize results should be fostered.

Institutional incentives such as the obligation to consult with stakeholders while drafting programs leads to better anticipation of demand, expectations, and acceptance of measures.

The systematic application of the **Do No Harm concept**, while often successfully integrated at the micro-level, has not yet become an integral part of policy planning. The discussion on unintended consequences, and what divides communities, needs to be part of the standard operating procedures.

Picture 3 - Participants' takeaways in a nutshell