Chapter 2: Stabilisation in practice – essential elements for effective delivery

There are seven essential elements that apply to all stabilisation activities at both operational and strategic levels. They are not sequential but work in combination.

1. **Driving factors – context, objectives and relationships**: Our actions must be driven by the context, core stabilisation objectives, and by our relationships with others operating in that context.
2. **Thinking and working politically**: We cannot separate 'political' from 'technical' stabilisation activity. All actions have political ramifications. We will be judged for how we operate as much as for what we do.
3. **Understanding – learning, honesty and adaptability**: We must improve our understanding constantly and adapt our activities as we learn. We must be honest about our influence, institutional strengths and weaknesses.
4. **Strategy – coherence, realism and integration**: We must continuously reinforce our strategic intent by pushing for the maximum possible strategic coherence, being realistic in our objectives, and facilitating internal integration and coordination with partners.
5. **Behaviour – humility, sensitivity and communication**: We must act with humility, consider conflict sensitivity and gender norms, and communicate our actions clearly and consistently.
6. **Monitoring evaluation and learning**: We must dedicate resources to this and integrate it throughout all activity.
7. **Planning for transition**: We must plan the transition from stabilisation towards longer-term peace and stability building from the start as decisions made during stabilisation will affect longer-term dynamics.

Introduction

1. The UK Approach to Stabilisation sets out how the UK government understands stabilisation and explains the distinction between stabilisation and other responses to violent conflict and instability. It defines stabilisation in terms of its overall objectives: supporting local and regional partners in conflict-affected countries to reduce violence, ensuring basic human security, and facilitating peaceful political deal-making, which all provide a foundation for building long-term stability. These are fleshed out in three key objectives:

   - the need to **protect** the means of survival and restoring basic security;
   - the need to **promote** and support a political process to reduce violence;
   - the need to **prepare** a foundation for longer-term stability.

2. The rest of this guide looks at how to translate these objectives into the implementation of stabilisation activities on the ground. The following chapters consider how a range of key thematic activities (security and justice, political deal-making, service delivery, and combatting transnational security threats) contribute towards stabilisation and how the scope and objectives of thematic activities differ during stabilisation compared to other environments.

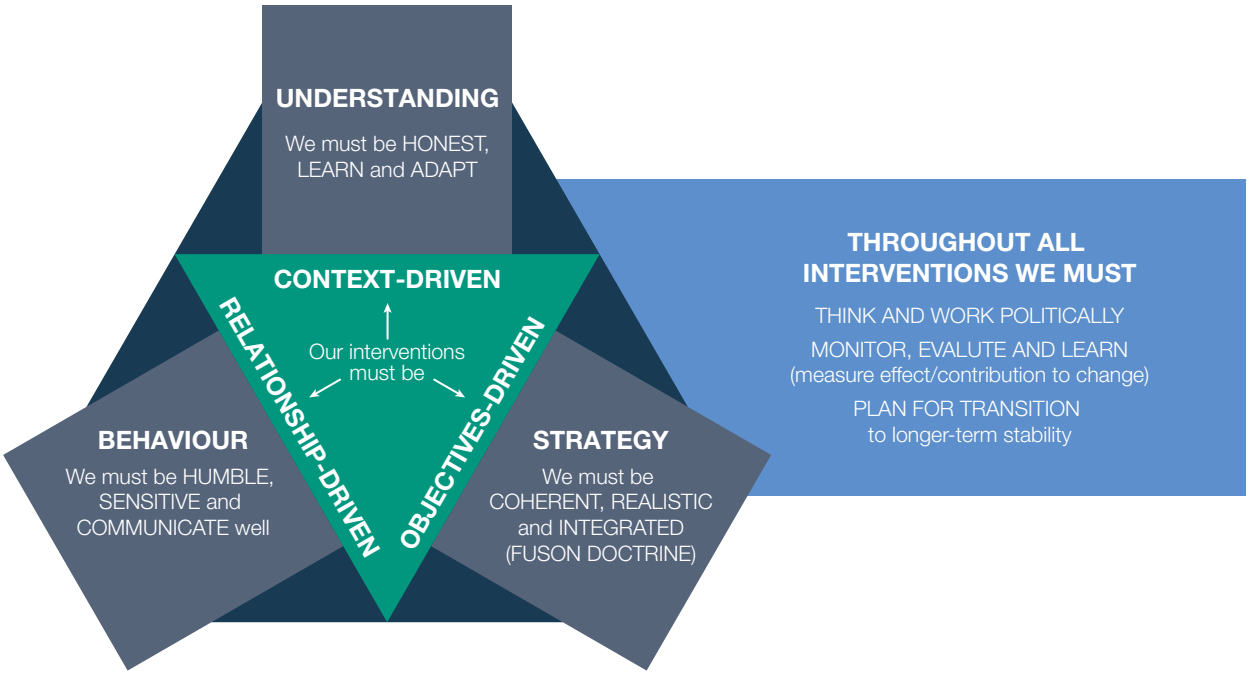
3. While each thematic area has its own issues and challenges, experience has shown that certain overarching considerations apply to all stabilisation activities. Common themes emerge from debriefing interviews, lessons-learning exercises, formal reviews and evaluations which can be considered as **seven essential elements** that apply equally at operational and strategic levels and are necessary for successful action:

   - driving factors – context, objectives and relationships;
   - thinking and working politically;
   - understanding – learning, honesty and adaptability;
   - strategy – coherence, realism and integration;
   - behaviour – humility, sensitivity and communication;
   - monitoring evaluation and learning;
   - planning for transition.

4. These are not abstract principles to which we commit rhetorically while getting on with the job as usual. Stabilisation involves working on complex and challenging issues in relation to state-society relations (who has power, who can use force, who provides or threatens security) in the most insecure and challenging contexts.It is difficult and uncertain work, and we must implement existing learning about how to operate. This does not mean following a 'best practice' template or implementing an idealised programme but does mean tailoring activities to match the situation. This chapter is not a set of instructions but a 'handrail' which aims to ensure that we regularly ask ourselves the right questions. The answers will depend on the context, available resources and the objectives of our activities.

> *Stabilisation involves working on complex and challenging issues in relation to state-society relations (who has power, who can use force, who provides or threatens security) in the most insecure and challenging contexts*

Essential elements for effective delivery



Essential element 1: Driving factors – context, objectives and relationships

5. The Armed Forces have a maxim: "Don't try to make the ground fit the map". Stabilisation activities **must understand and accept the situation on the ground** and address the reality of the specific context. Our actions must be driven by the context, the core stabilisation objectives, and by our relationships with others operating in that context (local actors, both state and non-state, but also other international actors). This contrasts with actions that are overly supply-driven, i.e. activities based on what it is easiest for us to deliver, rather than what is most needed. It also contrasts with actions that are overly shaped by the domestic politics of external actors.

Conflict, Stability and Security Fund

The **Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)** works to build peace and stability in countries and regions suffering from some of the world's most difficult and long-running conflicts. From the top down the CSSF takes a cross-government approach to support and deliver programmes that build stability and tackle fragility. It takes direction from the National Security Council, which includes secretaries of state from across government. Decisions on funding are determined at every level by cross-government boards which incentivise departments to work together to deliver government objectives. Programmes blend Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA funding which allows departments to deliver a broader range of interventions.

The model builds on lessons from the Iraq Inquiry, which highlighted the importance of departments working together in an integrated way, both in London and on the ground, towards common objectives. The CSSF complements departmental activity by providing resources to deliver programmes across a wider geographic and thematic reach. The CSSF's overall direction is guided by the priorities set out in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review and the UK Aid Strategy. It delivers against two national security objectives: 1) Protect Our People; 2) Project Our Global Influence; and three UK Aid objectives (strengthening global peace, security and governance, and strengthening resilience).

Source: *Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: annual report 2017 to 2018*

Context-driven

6. We must not be distracted by what we are expecting, prepared for or wish to see, or be misled by what we think we know: the context will not bend to suit us. Many challenges in stabilisation contexts have stemmed from a lack of realism about the context and about our capacity as external actors to quickly make substantial positive changes. If we do not understand who has power (formally and informally), who is in conflict with whom, cultural traditions, gender norms, historical sensitivities, local specificities, physical and geographic factors and much else, we are more likely to have unrealistic or false expectations about what will work. It means we are more likely to take actions that inadvertently cause harm and undermine our objectives.

> *We must not be distracted by what we are expecting, prepared for or wish to see, or be misled by what we think we know: the context will not bend to suit us*

7. This is critical in the earliest phases of an activities, when we know less about the context (and have limited capacity to collate or absorb existing analysis) but are under domestic political pressure to act quickly and decisively. This can be exacerbated by a natural optimism bias about the likely outcome of events and/or the political undesirability of acknowledging the limits of our knowledge. This is the **intervention paradox**: the point at which we first intervene is often the point when we have the most potential to affect change but it is also the point at which we have the least knowledge and understanding of the context and its political dynamics.[24]

8. This is not to argue that activities cannot be delivered until we have full knowledge of the context. It is never possible to know everything, and waiting too long for deeper information can lead to indecisiveness (sometimes nicknamed 'analysis paralysis'). Quick responses are often, but not always, imperative – we need to act while accepting the risks. We must **invest consistently in improving our contextual understanding** while admitting the limits to our knowledge and challenging our assumptions and we must adapt our activities as our understanding evolves.

Objectives-driven

9. Activities must begin from an understanding of what is truly needed in the given context to achieve stabilisation objectives, and only later consider who is best placed to deliver those activities. This approach also encourages more effective burden-sharing between actors. This can only be established through a process of analysis which consults at various levels: on the ground with local and national authorities, local populations, and other international actors, but also at the senior level in the relevant international headquarters.

10. The **analysis must focus on what is most required in order to achieve stabilisation objectives**. This will not be the same as humanitarian or development needs, though there is likely to be some overlap. Rather, it is about identifying the key factors that will contribute towards the achievement of the three overarching stabilisation objectives (protecting the means of survival and restoring basic security, promoting and supporting a political process to reduce violence, and preparing a foundation for longer-term stability).

24 Stabilisation Unit (2015) Stabilisation Interventions: Key Lessons. Unpublished

11. Once core requirements have been analysed, our responses must be planned in a context- and objectives-specific manner. While there are key thematic areas which are almost always relevant in stabilisation contexts (such as political deals, security and justice, service delivery, and transnational threats) **there is no identikit set of stabilisation activities that will guarantee success**. It is important to ask the right questions about who we are working with and what we are trying to achieve, and then develop our support on that basis.

12. Objectives-driven approaches must also consider **prioritisation and sequencing**. Which issues are preconditions for stabilisation, and which issues, however important, can wait until the basic conditions are in place for longer-term approaches to building stability? This reflects the reality that our resources, time and staff will always be finite and that we must therefore focus on the most important matters, informed by a clear theory of change.

> *Which issues are preconditions for stabilisation, and which issues, however important, can wait until the basic conditions are in place for longer-term approaches to building stability*

13. Lastly, objectives-driven approaches must consider how they might unintentionally interact with local dynamics, such as disaster resilience and humanitarian need. Where they are likely to negatively impact on any of those dimensions, adequate corrective measures need to be taken, and plans developed to minimise the risk of negative impact.

Relationship-driven

14. Questions of **ownership, agency and consent** need to be at the forefront of our actions. It is imperative to recognise that local actors will always have primacy. Thus, without the right relationships on the ground, the technical quality of our activities is largely irrelevant. Experience in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan has shown that external actors can fall into a spiral where they increasingly lose not just active support but even the consent of the population, and sometimes local authorities can too because of their association with foreigners.

15. Although we have some influence, **external actors have limited control over events on the ground**. Things will rarely happen just because we want them to and push hard. We therefore need to think in terms of supporting, facilitating, and catalysing changes, rather than deciding and implementing the changes ourselves. Moreover, we have often been over-optimistic about how far local partners will accept our advice and support. We need to be much more realistic about their motivations and incentives, and also about their individual and institutional capacities. They will often see external actors as a source of power and resources which they wish to harness for their own battles, and will message us accordingly.

16. We must **commit to local ownership but think carefully about what that entails**. In a stabilisation context it is not always clear which locals are legitimate 'owners'. There are significant risks of processes being captured in the name of local ownership, by local individuals or groups who are not motivated by the best interests of the broader population. For example, early measures in Afghanistan (2001–04) to ensure consent led to elite capture of stabilisation activities by the United Alliance. The risks of elite capture are particularly high when there is a weak or non-existent central authority or a stronger authority that has little local legitimacy. Rather than blindly delivering local ownership, the emphasis should be on regular two-way dialogue and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, formal and informal power-holders but also as far as possible civil society, business, religious leaders and other non-state actors. We should also be conscious that governments emerging out of conflict will have their own capacity constraints, they need to own activity but that does not mean the international community should not assist them in identifying requirements and formulating requests.

17. Similarly, we must be realistic that **consent** for stabilisation activities by external actors **will only ever be partial, conditional and contingent on events**. There are likely to be local actors who oppose the stabilisation process, whether on ideological grounds or because it threatens their (vested) interests. Unlike in classic peacekeeping, consent is not a pre-requisite, but it must be built and maintained. Often, this is about recognising the risks of potential spoilers and engaging with them proactively. Marginalising or alienating local authorities and local elites, even if inadvertently, is likely to provoke resistance and competing narratives about our activities.

> *Unlike in classic peacekeeping, consent is not a pre-requisite, but it must be built and maintained*

18. All this is complicated by **operating as part of a coalition**: one external actor among many bilateral and multilateral institutions, each with their own perspectives and priorities. It can be difficult for external actors to accept this apparent loss of control, but working with others and recognising that the host nation will have primacy is the only way to achieve our strategic objectives.

Key questions

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Contextual analysis	• Are UK senior officials emphasising the importance of context-specific, context-driven action? • Do we (have plans to) consistently refresh our understanding and adapt our activities as the context changes?	*Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability Guidance Note* Stabilisation Unit, 2017 *The Beginners Guide to Political Economy Analysis* NSGI, 2017 *Conflict Sensitivity Tools and Guidance* Stabilisation Unit, 2016
Identification of priority issues to achieve stabilisation objectives	• Is there agreement between operational actors, senior and political leaders and local populations which issues will make the biggest contribution to stabilisation? • Is this fully in line with our contextual analysis, including our understanding of what local people perceive to be required? • Do we have a clear and shared understanding of what factors are most important to achieve stabilisation? • Do we have a clear understanding of how this might negatively impact local resilience and humanitarian need? • Who have we consulted in order to develop that understanding? Have we received feedback from people on the ground, particularly marginalised and conflict-affected groups?	
Addressing consent and ownership	• Have we got the right balance between high-level partner government contacts and wider engagement with non-state actors and the public? • Do we understand who will support our activities and who is likely to be cautious or hostile and why? • What have we done to build support and consent? How are we engaging with (potential) spoilers? How are we engaging with marginalised groups, women and youth? • Have we analysed how our support might be manipulated or instrumentalised?	

Essential element 2: Thinking and working politically

19. External actors often focus on **what** they are doing rather than why and how they are intervening, particularly when under pressure to 'do something'. Yet the evidence demonstrates that **how** we operate matters as much as what we do. There is no point doing the right things if we do them in the wrong way, i.e. in a non-context-specific, conflict- or gender-sensitive manner (see Element 5 – behaviour). Most of all, we must start by recognising that **everything** we do in stabilisation contexts is political so we must **think and work politically in all our actions**.

20. Stabilisation is not simply about the primacy of politics or the need for political deals. It is both these things, but it is much more. It is about recognising that we cannot separate 'political' from 'technical' activities, because in stabilisation contexts, all aspects of any action have political ramifications, regardless of what is involved. We will be judged by local (and international) stakeholders for how we operate, as much as for what we do. This means external actors must have an incentive structure whereby teams are judged on how well, rather than how much, they deliver.

> *Stabilisation is not simply about the primacy of politics or the need for political deals. It is both these things, but it is much more … in stabilisation contexts, all aspects of any action have political ramifications, regardless of what is involved*

21. Many previous stabilisation activities have been relatively unsuccessful because they have been treated as primarily or exclusively technical matters, e.g. building infrastructure, providing basic services, building the capacity of government agencies (including security and justice actors) through training and equipment. Even where issues such as a lack of a political deal or large inequality were identified, they were treated as 'sectoral' issues to address, for example in service delivery, rather than fundamental political issues which run throughout stabilisation. Key contextual and political factors were overlooked, and activities affected the power balance in unforeseen ways. It is naïve to assume that we have the same objectives as local actors, and local elites often instrumentalise external interventions for their own benefit.[25]

Case study: Technical vs. political stabilisation activity

In the years immediately following the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, it was assumed that stability would be achieved through development support to the Transitional Administration. This led to large, technocratic, capacity-building projects which were largely divorced from the political realities. By contrast, during planning for the recovery of Mosul after the defeat of Daesh, the UK consciously focused on the importance of thinking politically. The UK worked hard with international partners to ensure a broader concept of stabilisation which went beyond the restoration of basic services and ensured that all support was informed by political analysis and considerations of longer-term political stability.

25 See A Rocha Menocal (2014) *Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently* (London: Overseas Development Institute)

Essential element 3: Understanding – learning, honesty and adaptability

22. We cannot think and work politically, be driven by the context, stabilisation objectives and our relationships on the ground if we do not **understand the context** well enough. This point was made bluntly in the Iraq Inquiry: "In any undertaking of this kind, certain fundamental elements are of vital importance, [starting with] the best possible appreciation of the theatre of operations, including the political, cultural and ethnic background, and the state of society, the economy and infrastructure".[26] We must therefore constantly be **learning and improving our understanding** of the issues and actors that most affect the prospects for stabilisation, and using this knowledge.

Learning

23. We must invest in research and monitoring and evaluation (see Element 6) from the outset and throughout our activities. Daily political reporting, media monitoring and situational updates are all important, but they need to be backed with more robust data and analysis from multiple sources and with a perspective that enables trends to be identified and decisions taken strategically rather than tactically. There are many tools and products which can be used, including conflict analysis, political economy analysis, gender analysis, internal analytical papers (e.g. from research analysts, defence analysts, etc.) and intelligence papers. Some of this information will be internal but we should also draw upon as many external sources as possible: academic and policy papers, interviews with local and international experts and NGOs (not least as they may well say more in discussion than on paper), analysis by other bilateral and multilateral international actors and so on. Investing in monitoring, evaluation and learning demands we continually measure our intended and unintended impacts on local resilience and on humanitarian need, and use the evidence to inform future decisions.

Commissioning research

Stabilisation actors on the ground do not need to lead substantial research and analysis processes themselves, but they do need to bring in additional expertise to deliver research and engage with the process to ensure it meets their needs. Guidance on research tools is provided under further resources, but it can also be helpful to discuss the tools and the commissioning process in person. As a first port of call, Stabilisation Unit regional coordinators should be able to advise on who to speak to about particular tools and how to commission them. DFID conflict and governance advisers both in-country and in Whitehall (CHASE) can also be helpful.

26 J Chilcot (2016) *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry. Executive Summary* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office) para. 859, p. 134.

24. Improving our understanding is not simply about generating more data and analysis but about interpreting it well enough to act upon it. Despite the perception that stabilisation contexts are data-poor, considerable research and analysis is often available. The challenge is to condense data into formats which are accessible to policy-makers and practitioners and to ensure that this knowledge is used, particularly as we move beyond immediate crisis response (when decision-makers' capacity to absorb complex analysis is inevitably limited). **Synthesis and presentation of analysis** can therefore be as important as generating it in the first place.

25. We must also ensure **shared understanding**, which goes beyond simply sharing information with all relevant stakeholders. Access to the same information is not on its own enough to build shared understanding. Processes to consider this information and analysis – such as Joint Analyses of Conflict and Stability – are required.

26. One other factor to consider is **recruitment** policy. Although it is not always possible, as far as possible we should aim to employ people who already have some understanding of the context or can acquire it more quickly. This means individuals who have the experience, networks, mindset and language skills to provide a deeper understanding of the realities on the ground. This applies both to local and international staff, whether in policy, programmatic or communications roles (including within implementing partners).

Honesty

27. Generating data is not enough if uncomfortable findings are not truly accepted and acted upon. This is another core lesson from the Iraq Inquiry:

> 'Ground truth is vital. Over-optimistic assessments lead to bad decisions. Senior decision-makers – ministers, chiefs of staff, senior officials – must have a flow of accurate and frank reporting … At times in Iraq, the bearers of bad tidings were not heard … Effective audit mechanisms need to be used to counter optimism bias, whether through changes in the culture of reporting, use of multiple channels of information – internal and external – or use of visits.'[27]

28. Similarly, we must be **honest not only about the context but also about our own institutional strengths and weaknesses and the nature of our influence, positive and negative**:

- Incentivising honesty: Honest analysis requires a safe space. Senior officials must lead by example in encouraging honesty, alternative viewpoints and constructive challenge to plans and received wisdom. We need to challenge our assumptions throughout. For example, we must not assume that power structures and decision-making operate in a fashion we are familiar with. We need to understand what approaches are considered most legitimate and locally appropriate by key stakeholders. Similarly, we must avoid gender analysis that relies on stereotypes rather than research and evidence.
- Acknowledging the limits to our knowledge: If we cannot acknowledge what we do not know, we have little chance either of making good decisions or targeting information gathering and analysis to address these gaps.

27 Ibid., para. 863, p. 135

- Acknowledging that we are not neutral: External actors are never neutral and will not be perceived as neutral. They are always trying to influence the situation, even when they believe they are acting altruistically and in the best interests of local populations. In previous stabilisation activities, we have not always sufficiently understood the political economy of our own intervention, and have been surprised to meet indifference, subversion or outright hostility.[28] We need to act with greater humility and ensure that we are conflict-sensitive. We should consider working with or through others who have different and potentially more effective relationships with local actors.

> *External actors are never neutral and will not be perceived as neutral*

- Acknowledging risk and the likelihood of setbacks: Large institutions are often risk-averse, resulting in a tendency, reinforced by optimism biases, to downplay the high chance that at least some actions will not succeed and to over-estimate the capacity to mitigate risks. This in turn can rapidly create a culture in which it is not possible to discuss the gaps in our knowledge and the weaknesses in our actions, which only increases the longer-term risks to our stabilisation activities and our reputation.

Adaptability

29. We must constantly learn as we go and keep **adapting our activities**, ensuring we are achieving our objectives in a conflict-sensitive manner. It should be a warning sign if we do not adapt our activities as our understanding evolves. This requires internal monitoring and evaluation processes that promote honest acknowledgement of failures and challenges and a culture of flexibility and adaptation at all levels of management. Activities must be designed **from the start** to be flexible so that they can be readily adapted to changing circumstances and new insights.

30. In some cases, particularly in early stages of an activity, our limited knowledge of complex challenges may mean that we do not possess enough information to know what responses are likely to be effective. In such circumstances, we need to be even more iterative and adaptive, testing and probing to identify what forms of activity in which areas are likely to be more effective. This might be characterised not only as 'learning while doing' but '**doing to learn**'.

28 The Elite Bargains and Political Deals study referenced above describes several such cases: "There are also instances where elites played a role in derailing bargaining processes. In some cases, such as in Mozambique, this resulted from the challenges (or transition costs) that leaders faced in making the transition from fighters to negotiators. In other cases, incumbent elites actively resisted the implementation of peace agreements that diluted their powers – as for example in Nepal, in which central state elites reasserted their control during a prolonged period of transition, reversing many of the gains made as a result of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord. In other cases, negotiations were derailed as a result of how elites used negotiations to shore up support or shift the balance of power within a conflict, especially in highly unstable contexts." C Cheng et al. (2018) op. cit., p. 25

Key questions

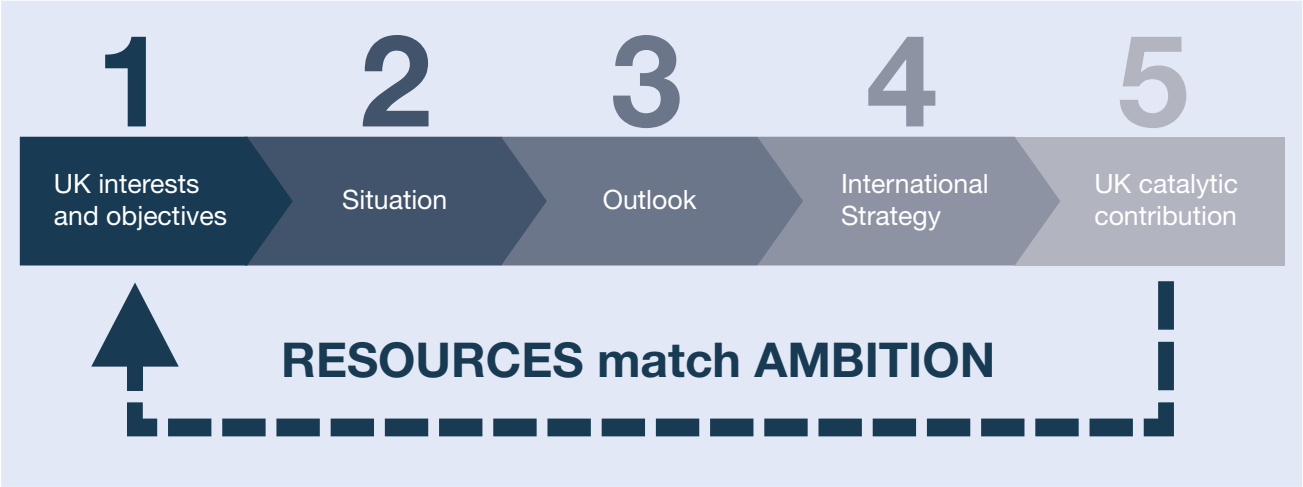
Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Synthesis and sharing of knowledge	• Do all staff have a shared understanding of the context? • Who within government has relevant data and contextual analysis? • Have we shared useful data and analysis with others, internally and externally as appropriate? • Have we incorporated external scrutiny and challenge to avoid groupthink and optimism bias? • Do we understand the major data gaps, and have a resourced plan in place for how to address them?	*Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability Guidance Note* Stabilisation Unit, 2017 Serious and Organised Crime Joint Analysis (SOJCA): contact Stabilisation Unit for details *Analysis for Conflict and Stabilisation Interventions* Stabilisation Unit, 2014 *The Beginner's Guide to Political Economy Analysis* National School of Government International, 2017 Andrews M, Pritchett L, Samji S and Woolcock M, *Building capability by delivering results: Putting Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) principles into practice* OECD, 2015
Honest analysis of institutional strengths and weaknesses	• Is there a culture of honesty and acknowledging institutional blind spots? • What are the (dis)incentives for honesty? • How can we challenge our assumptions and the conventional wisdom, and how can we reduce the risk of groupthink? • Where do we have limited knowledge? What do we think we know, and can we back this up? • How much influence do we genuinely have over key actors, institutions and processes? • Which actors will support or oppose our activities? • How likely are certain activities to succeed in this context? • What are the key risks and challenges?	
Invest in data generation, collection and analysis	• Which issues and actors will most affect stabilisation? Which will be most affected by stabilisation activities? • What issues, actors, locations must be better understood? • What resources have been committed and what plans are in place to guarantee that useful monitoring data will be provided? • Are we ensuring we have disaggregated data to understand differences between groups (e.g. gender, age, disability)? • Are we spending enough resources (including time) on data and analysis? • How well do we use our analysis and understanding to inform delivery?	

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Learn as we go	What has been done to incentivise honesty (including honest reporting of challenges and failures), learning and adaptability? • Does senior management encourage and prioritise regular lesson learning exercises? • Are we getting the right information and analysis, at the right time, about both the context and the activities? • Has the context changed (or not changed as expected)? • Has our understanding of the context changed? • Have we invested in evidence and MEL to strengthen our understanding of our intended and unintended impact? • What are we learning from existing or previous activities about what does and doesn't work and why? • How is learning shared internally and externally?	
Keep adapting our activities	How rapidly does new information and analysis feed through to changes in activities? • Are senior leaders receptive to changes, even when this requires reversing previous decisions? • Have we built in flexibility to adapt as necessary? • Who needs to act on any contextual changes or lessons identified?	

Essential element 4: Strategy – coherence, realism and integration

31. The 2018 National Security Capability Review (NSCR) launched the **Fusion Doctrine**, setting out how the UK will blend its resources and "deploy security, economic and influence capabilities to protect, promote and project our national security, economic and influence goals". The Fusion Doctrine is a cross-government approach to develop joint understanding, facilitate joint planning and enable integrated delivery.

Fusion doctrine and Chilcot compliance



Strategic coherence and realism

32. Strategic coherence depends on being clear about what we are trying to achieve, ensuring that we have the right resources to achieve these objectives, and ensuring that all activities, both the UK's and those of our partners, will combine to achieve these objectives. This requires:

- Setting objectives which provide a clear direction of travel but avoid overly precise or over-ambitious targets. The Iraq Inquiry calls for "objectives which are realistic within that context, and if necessary limited – rather than idealistic and based on optimistic assumption" as a "fundamental element … of vital importance".[29] We must **avoid binary narratives that imply 100% success or failure**. Stabilisation objectives should be framed in terms of positive outcomes and a clear direction of travel, rather than predicting what can be achieved in (for example) 18 to 24 months which risks other results, no matter how significant, being portrayed as 'failure' if the precise target is not met. Precise targets can also provide perverse incentives for implementers putting the focus on those targets rather than stabilisation outcomes (e.g. restoring basic security and establishing the political foundations for longer-term stability).

29 J Chilcot (2016) op. cit., para. 859, p. 134

- Ensuring objectives are commensurate with resources. We should not be afraid to **set manageable objectives**. Working in difficult circumstances, what might appear from the outside to be relatively modest impacts may be critical steps that prepare the transition towards longer-term stability. In this regard, 'success' in stabilisation contexts can rarely be measured through considerable and rapid improvements. Rather, stabilisation activities may aim to halt a cycle of decline, preventing something worse from happening. The Iraq Inquiry is blunt in its conclusions: The gap between the ambitious objectives with which the UK entered Iraq and the resources that the government was prepared to commit to the task was substantial from the start. Even with more resources it would have been difficult to achieve those objectives … despite the considerable efforts made by UK civilian and military personnel over this period, the results were meagre.[30]
- Objectives that could be achieved relatively easily in more stable contexts may require much greater resources in stabilisation contexts, not least because operating costs are usually much higher. **It is necessary to rigorously and honestly interrogate whether individual activities combine to achieve higher-order objectives**. Imprecise or poorly-articulated objectives allow any action to be presented as a contribution towards the stabilisation goal, resulting in disparate activities that are less, not more, than the sum of their parts. It is akin to claiming that if our goal is to complete a jigsaw, as long as we have a few jigsaw pieces, we are on our way to achieving the goal, even if we cannot see how they fit together and no patterns are emerging. We must have a plausible, coherent pathway towards achieving these objectives (see 'theories of change' box). Are our assumptions of how change happens correct in this context? Do our approaches and activity support this change in pursuit of our strategic objectives?
- **Acknowledging and addressing trade-offs**. We need to avoid the assumption that "all good things come together", i.e. that all activities are mutually supportive. There will be tensions between short-term exigencies and longer-term objectives, between the priorities of different political groups and security actors, and between local and international actors. We must acknowledge these trade-offs, discuss them, and consciously decide which we are making and why. These decisions should be documented to demonstrate that trade-offs were made legitimately considering the available evidence at the time. Acknowledging trade-offs is not the same as 'relaxing controls', which can cause problems down the line (for example if aid is diverted to prohibited groups who have taken advantage of crisis operations).

30 Ibid., para. 797, p. 110

Theories of change

A theory of change (ToC) describes how change is assumed to come about as a result of intervention in a prevailing situation.

ToCs are often set out as a diagram and supporting narrative showing the causal pathway, i.e. the links between activities, outputs, outcomes, and the contribution to impact. It makes clear that these pathways rest on a set of assumptions, and that these assumptions are supported by varying degrees of evidence. The process of developing or updating a ToC can help to highlight evidence gaps, make explicit and interrogate our assumptions, and develop shared understanding.

It is important to emphasise that theories of change do not need to be linear and usually should not be in stabilisation contexts. Theories of change are often presented as simple diagrams (x will lead to y which leads to z). Yet we often don't know exactly what will get the best results and the context is constantly changing. In this regard, a central tenet of stabilisation theories of change is that we are always learning and adapting. A good analogy is that stabilisation activities are like sailing a boat: we know roughly where we need to go, and we know roughly how to get there, but we will need to tack according to the winds.

Internal integration and external coordination

33. The need for **cross-government working** or joined-up government is well recognised. Governments are at risk of siloed working, where different government bodies and departments are comfortable planning and sharing information within their own hierarchies but find it difficult to jointly analyse, plan and deliver activity. Moreover, many career incentives are departmental-based and cross-government working is seen as an additional task. In stabilisation, this is compounded by differences between civilian and military planning and decision-making structures and traditions, which can lead to mutual misunderstanding and frustration. Tensions between the centre and embassies and/or bases on the ground are also inevitably given different perspectives and priorities.

34. The Fusion Doctrine aims to overcome these challenges. It builds on the UK's experiences of driving an **integrated approach** to stabilisation which emphasises the need for civilian-military cooperation and cross-departmental coordination. Frictions can be alleviated through joint training, joint units (such as the Stabilisation Unit), joint analysis (such as a Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability), joint strategies (National Security Council country strategies and meetings), joint funding (the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund), and ultimately by building a shared culture of mutual interest and understanding. Integrated approaches also require mechanisms to coordinate and share information, analysis and decision-making between those on the ground and those at the centre. It also means avoiding jargon and using words which everyone understands in the same way.

35. Just as we must be integrated internally, we must aim for the maximum realistic degree of **coordination with external actors, both national partners and other international donors or actors.** These interactions are likely to be complicated. Despite commitments to 'coordination', donor and coalition partner relationships are subject to the same strains as internal integration but without the same sense of a shared institutional identity, and full coordination is unobtainable. Nevertheless, we must work with others as best we can. Uncoordinated activity is not only inefficient but reduces the chances of achieving higher-order objectives, especially if there are contradictions between the positions of key international partners. At the same time, a strategic plan that is dependent on high levels of donor coordination is almost certainly doomed to failure. Where effective cooperation is not possible, we should look at more modest engagement, including de-confliction, consultation or at times just co-existence.

Uncoordinated activity is not only inefficient but reduces the chances of achieving higher-order objectives, especially if there are contradictions between the positions of key international partners

Key questions

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Establishment of objectives in line with need (not supply)	• Are our objectives responding to the most important stabilisation issues in the best way? • What issues are not being addressed? Are others doing this? • Do our stabilisation objectives flow from our identification of the key issues? If not, why not?	*The Good Operation: A Handbook for those Involved in Operational Policy and Its Implementation* Ministry of Defence, 2018 Woodrow P and Oatley N, *Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security and Justice Programmes – Part 1*. DFID, 2013
Set objectives which provide a clear direction of travel, but avoid precise and over-ambitious targets	• Can all involved explain, simply and clearly, what the overarching objectives are and how they contribute towards them? If not, why not? • Are the objectives (still) realistic? Over what time frame could they be achieved, and what would prevent them from being achieved? • Are objectives expressed so that they give a clear direction of travel but are not too prescriptive or inflexible?	
Rigorously and honestly interrogate whether individual activities combine to achieve higher-order objectives	• Do our activities add up towards genuine achievement of our strategic stabilisation objectives? • Have we reviewed this recently and regularly? • Is there a clear link between individual activities and other activities in the same thematic or geographic area (including by other local and international actors)? • How does the individual activity make a genuine and substantial contribution towards higher-order objectives, in line with the overall theory of change?	
Ensure objectives are commensurate with resources	• Are the resources committed commensurate with the overarching strategic objectives? • Are we confident that the available resources are sufficient to achieve the activity's objectives and deliver it in the right way? • What are the risks of injecting further resources into the local political economy and how will we manage them?	

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Acknowledge and address trade-offs	• Have we acknowledged, weighed up and documented decisions regarding trade-offs? • Have we flagged any trade-offs and either dealt with them ourselves or escalated them to seniors as appropriate?	
Promote internal integration	• Are teams adequately incentivised to work together? • Do systems and structures facilitate efficient integrated working and decision making? • Is it clear how and by whom decisions are made when interests do not naturally coincide? • How are we sharing information, analysis, and planning with partners across government? • Do we plan jointly with other departments? At what stages do we consult with other departments?	
Aim for the maximum realistic level of external coordination	• Are teams encouraged and supported to strengthen coordination with external partners (local and international)? • How do our activities fit (combine but not duplicate or clash) with the actions of other national and international actors? • What, if anything, prevents us from working more closely with external partners, including at the design and implementation phases? What can we do to improve coordination?	

Essential element 5: Behaviour – humility, sensitivity and communication

36. As discussed above, how we deliver our activities (our behaviour) is as important as what we deliver. A fundamental aspect of this is to recognise that the way we engage with others will affect how we, as external actors, are perceived both locally and internationally. This in turn affects our capacity to positively influence stability, as everything that we do will be interpreted and misinterpreted through these perceptions of our roles and motivations. This means that it is essential to act with humility and to consider how our actions will affect the local conflict dynamics (conflict sensitivity) and gender norms (gender sensitivity). It also means explaining our activities clearly and consistently, particularly through our communications with local and international audiences, but also through all our actions and approaches.

Humility

37. In most circumstances we will be playing a supporting and facilitating role in stabilisation. Unless we are humble in the way in which we provide this support, we are unlikely to be effective. This underlines the need for **respectful and open engagement with local partners**, both state and non-state. We must not be naïve about how we are perceived by local actors. If we intervene in a way that demonstrates our ignorance of the local context or an unwillingness to learn, we will not only lose the trust of potential allies but also open ourselves up to manipulation by unscrupulous actors. This also includes the protection of cultural property: the failure of external actors to respect and protect a nation's cultural heritage in times of conflict can have very negative impacts. By contrast, if we demonstrate a genuine commitment to engagement with local stakeholders (including careful engagement with potential spoilers) and to operating in a conflict- and gender-sensitive manner,[31] this can build good will and improve our understanding of the context. However, as discussed above, this is not as simple as simply promoting 'local ownership'.

31 When engaging with local actors, and particularly with potential spoilers, we need to think carefully about how this will be perceived by other locals. How should such contacts be explained to local audiences? Are proactive communications needed to explain why we are engaging with certain actors? Or should they be 'below the radar', with a communications strategy prepared in case the meetings become public knowledge?

Sensitivity

38. Conflict sensitivity and gender sensitivity are also critical. **Conflict sensitivity** is often confused with 'do no harm', yet stabilisation practitioners understand that there are always trade-offs and that it may be impossible to entirely avoid doing harm (even though protection of civilians will always be a primary objective). At its simplest, conflict sensitivity is about considering how to minimise (but not necessarily eliminate) the risks of negatively affecting conflict dynamics and, wherever possible, contribute towards improvements in conflict dynamics. This could perhaps be summarised as 'doing minimal conscious harm'. So, conflict sensitivity is essential to stabilisation. If a core goal of stabilisation is to move towards a political settlement that reduces violence and instability, it is obvious that this cannot be achieved without understanding how our activities impact on immediate conflict dynamics. And while the risk of harm cannot be entirely eliminated, stabilisation interventions should seek to **minimise any negative impact** they have on humanitarian need and resilience.

> *At its simplest, conflict sensitivity is about considering how to minimise (but not necessarily eliminate) the risks of negatively affecting conflict dynamics and, wherever possible, contribute towards improvements in conflict dynamics*

39. Similarly, **gender sensitivity** is not an optional extra but a cornerstone of long-term stabilisation. In all UK government action, gender equality is a priority in its own right, as outlined in the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. The National Action Plan is the UK's strategy for how it will meet its commitment to UNSCR1325.

The four pillars of the WPS agenda are:

Prevention: prevention of conflict and all forms of violence against women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Participation: women participate equally with men and gender equality is promoted in peace and security decision-making processes at national, local, regional and international levels.

Protection: women and girls' rights are protected and promoted in conflict-affected situations.

Relief and Recovery: women and girls' specific relief needs are met and women's capacities to act as agents in relief and recovery are reinforced in conflict and post-conflict situations.

The UK National Action Plan (2018–22) outlines how the UK will contribute to these four pillars through seven strategic outcomes: decision-making, peacekeeping, gender-based violence, humanitarian response, security and justice, preventing and countering violent extremism, UK capabilities.

40. Moreover, it is also a legal requirement for all UK activity which involves the use of development funding, as per the 2014 International Development (Gender Equality) Act. This stipulates a duty to consider how the UK government's development assistance will contribute to reducing gender inequality before assistance is provided, and to take gendered differences in needs fully into account before providing humanitarian assistance.

41. Like conflict sensitivity, the concept of gender sensitivity is often confused with direct action to promote gender equality. It is recognised that activities that explicitly aim to promote gender equality are inherently long-term and limited progress may be possible in highly insecure environments. It is also acknowledged that issues around gender equality are often politically and socially charged issues and may well have been instrumentalised within the current conflict or instability. This underlines the importance of conceiving actions with knowledge of the local context, including learning from local actors such as women's rights organisations, and underpinning all action with risk analysis. At the same time, conflict can also act as a catalyst for more positive change, opening space to challenge existing norms and promote equality.

42. Gender sensitivity requires an ability to recognise:

- the different ways that women and men's roles are understood;
- the impacts of gender-inequitable norms and behaviours (e.g. participation rates, access to resources, control of assets, decision-making powers, etc.);
- how women, men, girls and boys can have different perceptions and experiences of stability and security, including the fact that women are much more likely to be victims of sexual and gender-based violence both in conflict and at other times.

Secondly, gender sensitivity requires us to act upon this knowledge by ensuring that, as with conflict sensitivity, our actions minimise any risks of worsening gender inequalities and gender relations and wherever possible seek to improve gender equality. A gender-sensitive stabilisation approach will recognise that the conflict may have differently affected the roles and opportunities of women and men, and that post-conflict periods often see a backlash against improvements in gender equality. Stabilisation activities should be mindful of their impact on individuals and groups, but also on gender norms, the system of relations among men and women in each context. In this way, evidence-based gender analysis is a fundamental part of understanding a conflict and a context, as well as understanding the roles, motivations and limitation of partners and other actors.

Communications

43. We need to be able to explain what we are doing and why if we wish to maintain and build support and consent for our actions, and more broadly for our role as an external actor in the stabilisation context. This emphasises the importance of **strategic communications**: communications conducted to achieve specified, agreed and measurable objectives and effects at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Strategic communications need to be fully integrated into policy-making from the earliest stages and aligned with wider policy (including by ensuring that communicators are including in decision-making at all levels).

44. The communications landscape has become ever more complicated in recent years, with a need to communicate in multiple directions and to multiple audiences, all of which are able to (over)hear what is communicated to others. It is far from simple to find the right language, methods and platforms to communicate with so many different groups (local populations, powerful local stakeholders including antagonists, regional and international actors, the media, parliament and public of the UK and other donor countries) in ways that are acceptable to all of these actors. Many of these actors are politically and media-savvy and will easily spot and expose any communications which do not ring true or offend their core values. Moreover, we should not forget that other actors are just as good if not better at using communications to promote their interests.

45. For all these reasons, strategic communications need to be based on a thorough understanding of the local context, audience and the environment in which they are taking place (see Element 1) and build upon a close working relationship with local counterparts whose knowledge and credibility is essential. Our understanding of the communications landscape (including segmented and gender-disaggregated audience analysis) and of our core messages needs constant updating through monitoring and research, enabling us to learn and adapt.

Key questions

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Engage local partners in a respectful and open manner	• How frequently and how openly do we engage with local partners, both state and non-state, formal and informally?	*Conflict Sensitivity Tools and Guidance* Stabilisation Unit, 2016
Think politically in all our actions	• Are all staff suitably aware of the political nature of stabilisation as it relates both to overarching objectives and their own contributions? • Have we considered who stands to benefit and who stands to gain or lose from our actions? • How can we minimise the risks of our actions being manipulated or instrumentalised?	
Apply conflict sensitivity	• How is conflict sensitivity monitored and how is it incentivised? • How will our activity interact with the conflict and affect conflict and security dynamics? • Have we identified any short- and long-term risks to conflict dynamics from the activity? • How can we minimise these risks?	

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Minimise harm	• Have we identified any short or longer-term risk of negative consequences of our actions? • How are identifying and tracking any unintended consequences of our programmes? • What plans have we in place to minimise and mitigate negative impacts?	
Apply gender sensitivity	• How is gender sensitivity monitored and incentivised? • Do we have enough knowledge of current gender roles, norms and behaviours, and any gender inequalities in the host environment? • Have we identified any short- and long-term risks or opportunities relating to gender roles or gender equality from the activity? • How can we minimise these risks and maximise these opportunities?	
Communicate effectively and carefully with all audiences	• What role should senior decision-makers play in coordinating communications activities so that our communications fully support our strategic objectives? • Have we considered how our actions will be perceived by other audiences, including local populations, powerful local stakeholders (including antagonists), regional and international actors, and UK audiences? • How will our communications build understanding and consent for ongoing stabilisation activities among all these audiences?	

Essential element 6: Monitoring, evaluation and learning

46. Although monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes are discussed towards the end of this chapter, they must be considered throughout, from the early stages of planning through to post-implementation reflection. This short section is not guidance on how to improve MEL, as this is covered in separate guidance notes (see 'further resources'). It focuses on why MEL systems and processes are so important and why they must be integrated through stabilisation.

47. Different departments use different **terminology**: the Armed Forces have established procedures for 'measuring effect', DFID and the CSSF refer to 'MEL', and other departments use different terminology and tools. However, all deal with the same fundamental ideas:

- clarifying what counts as success and monitoring progress towards this;
- assessing and understanding how our actions are contributing to change;
- using this information to improve the design, delivery and management of our activities.

48. Monitoring is the continuous assessment of progress through the regular collection of data about the activities (and the wider context). Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an ongoing or completed activity, its design, implementation and results. Annual reviews are less detailed than independent evaluations but are a crucial opportunity to step back and take stock.

49. **MEL links to all the other essential elements**. It will inform our understanding of context, objectives and relationships (Element 1), allowing us to think and work politically (Element 2). It helps our understanding and is a critical part of learning and adapting (Element 3). The relationship between strategic coherence and objective setting at both the top strategic level and at more operational levels (Element 4) MEL is particularly important. Simply put, MEL is not only about measuring progress and success. We cannot measure progress effectively if we do not have a clear idea of what we are trying to achieve, i.e. if we do not have well-stated objectives. MEL must also track and inform our behaviour, conflict- and gender-sensitivity and strategic communications (Element 5). And it will provide the evidence that should inform decisions about transition (Element 7).

50. To deliver on this commitment, **dedicated MEL resources** are required (e.g. 5% of overall budgets), including management capacity within the UK government. It is critically important that delivery and use of MEL data is a senior management responsibility, as otherwise MEL quickly becomes divorced from quickly changing operations and the data it generates is not used to inform decision-making.

Key questions

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Dedication of MEL resources	• Have enough (financial and human) resources been committed to MEL? • Who has senior responsibility for MEL? • Is there a MEL plan or system in place that covers the full scope or our activity? If not, why not? • Do we have detailed plans in place for MEL data collection and analysis?	*Monitoring and Evaluation of Conflict and Stabilisation Interventions* Stabilisation Unit, October 2014.
Integration of MEL across all areas	• Is MEL thoroughly integrated into strategic planning? If not, why not? • Are we collecting the right data at the right time to make informed decisions on progress towards transition? • How is MEL data being used to inform our activities? How are we learning and adapting in response to MEL data and analysis?	

Essential element 7: Planning for transition

51. Like MEL, the fact that transition is presented at the end should not imply any form of sequencing: we must be **planning right from the start to transition** away from stabilisation towards longer-term efforts to build peace and stability. This is far from easy, however, since these phases do not have clear boundaries and overlap with other forms of longer-term engagement in multiple ways.

Transition in theory and practice

52. The idea of transition is simple enough. Stabilisation is the first phase of a response to violent conflict, but as the situation does stabilise, we should move towards longer-term, less crisis-focused engagement akin to how we operate in environments which are fragile but not entirely violent or hostile. At this stage, DFID's Building Stability Framework becomes the most appropriate framework for our activity.

> *Stabilisation is the first phase of a response to violent conflict, but as the situation does stabilise, we should move towards longer-term, less crisis-focused engagement akin to how we operate in environments which are fragile but not entirely violent or hostile*

53. In practice, however, it is near impossible to define where stabilisation ends and the 'building stability' phase begins. This does not mean that we cannot measure progress towards stability. On the contrary, good monitoring and evaluation (Element 6) is vital so that decisions on transition are based on a realistic assessment of conditions on the ground. This is not a question of absolute standards but rather **whether the situation is good enough and moving in the right direction**. In line with the overarching objectives of stabilisation, key factors to consider include:

- Political deals: has enough progress has been made on establishing a political deal which can be backed by a broadly representative government (see 'facilitating political deals')?
- Political stability: is there now enough political stability to manage the inevitable pressures of daily politics without recourse to violence?
- Security: is the security sector sufficiently effective and governable to deliver basic security? Does a minimal level of accountability exist?
- Capacity to govern: does the partner government have enough capacity to debate policy and take and implement critical decisions?

54. Senior decision-makers often search for a way of defining exactly when and how transition should take place, not least under political pressure from domestic audiences to guarantee that the stabilisation activity has a defined endpoint. However, **both time-bound and conditions-bound approaches to establishing transition points can come unstuck**. Time-bound approaches create perverse incentives for both local and international actors to play along and run the clock down. Conditions-bound approaches can become a straightjacket if the conditions were never realistically achievable, or have become unachievable due to contextual changes, but there are political obstacles to moving the goalposts.

55. Moreover, transitions rarely take place under ideal circumstances. The political pressure to end stabilisation activities tends to grow over time, both on the ground (e.g. political or violent opposition to foreign forces, demands from the partner government to treat them as a 'normal' country) and at home (e.g. pressure to end an action that has become unpopular). In such cases, the demands for 'transition' may become overwhelming even if expert assessment suggests that the country is not fully ready to transition away from stabilisation.

56. Ultimately, therefore, the **formal decision to transition** away from stabilisation towards longer-term engagement **is a matter of political judgement and negotiation** between external and local actors. Officials should highlight the implications of transition so that this is an informed decision.

Integrating transition planning into all stabilisation activity

57. Transition is closely linked to strategy (Element 4). On one level, this is obvious. The ultimate objective of all stabilisation activity is to achieve conditions which allow us to transition away from stabilisation. However, planners and implementers often do not appreciate how deeply intertwined stabilisation and longer-term engagement are, or the implications this has for our planning.

58. Even if stabilisation is a shorter-term activity, **decisions made during stabilisation can have a very significant effect on longer-term dynamics**. For example, any elite deal or political settlement made to end or reduce violence will have huge implications for the chances of improving governance. Similarly, when we support local security actors as part of efforts to establish a basic level of security, our decisions about who we support and affect the prospects for security sector reform for years to come.

"any elite deal or political settlement made to end or reduce violence will have huge implications for the chances of improving governance. Similarly, when we support local security actors as part of efforts to establish a basic level of security, our decisions about who we support and affect the prospects for security sector reform for years to come"

59. Even decisions born from short-term necessity must be conscious that there will be implications: the fact that some issues are long-term does not mean they can be ignored until they can be 'handed over'. At the same time, short-term decisions do have to be taken, but they must be taken consciously. We should be open and honest about the inevitable trade-offs between short-term and long-term stability. We should also recognise that the most obvious short-term solution should sometimes be avoided as it will have the most negative long-term consequences.

Preparing the ground for a transition away from stabilisation

60. Once it has been politically agreed that a transition will take place, we must work to ensure that it takes place as smoothly as possible. Although there will often be a political requirement for a specific date on which transition formally takes place, transition should in fact be a **gradual process**. The key challenge is to ensure that the handover does not result in significant gaps or ruptures, or on the other hand, confusion about why different actors are running similar but distinct activities that appear to overlap. Transition relates not only to transference of authorities and drawdown of assets, but also to issues such as maintaining and transferring institutional knowledge.

61. As well as being a gradual process, **transition is unlikely to be entirely linear**. There will be shocks and set-backs and some violence may be ongoing. There are numerous examples, where conflicts have re-started or flared up even after significant national and international stabilisation support, including Kosovo, DRC and South Sudan. Flexibility and adaptability are vital, and the stabilisation approach may on occasion need to be re-applied in areas which have previously transitioned out of stabilisation. Therefore, even after the transition we must maintain some capacity for stabilisation responses to be implemented should the situation require them.

Key questions

Steps	Prompt questions	Tools and further reading
Plan towards a transition out of stabilisation	• How do our stabilisation efforts contribute to longer-term stability and what are the trade-offs? • Can we articulate, in broad terms, where the boundaries or transition lie between stabilisation and longer-term engagement? • Are our actions collectively moving in the direction of transition? • What preparation is required? Has been done to ensure a smooth transition process at the appropriate time? • How do our stabilisation activities link with longer-term engagement? • What can we do now to prepare for transition and ensure a smooth handover (of knowledge, data, contacts and relationships, etc.)?	