

Helpdesk Research Report

Multi-agency stabilisation operations

Becky Carter

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Question

Identify literature on best practice and lessons learned in multi-agency stabilisation¹ operations. What evidence is available on whether civilian or military leadership produce better outcomes in different contexts?

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1. Overview

This rapid review collates information on government approaches to multi-agency stabilisation efforts in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Since the 2000s multi-agency operations have been widely adopted by both bilateral and multilateral government actors to meet interlinked political, development and military objectives. Often termed ‘whole-of-government’, this type of approach aims to provide external assistance in “a coherent, co-ordinated and complementary manner across different government actors within an assisting country (most critically security, diplomatic and development agencies)” (OECD 2011: p. 60). The approaches can involve multi-agency coordination at various levels including strategic; analysis and planning; funding; operational; and monitoring and evaluation.

There appears to be limited empirical evidence of what works best with these approaches. Many of these approaches are new and ongoing in (sometimes violent, often rapidly changing) contexts notoriously

¹ Working definition of stabilisation: “Stabilisation is support to countries engaged in, emerging from, or at risk of descending into, violent conflict. It involves international actors working with a range of local partners to: prevent or reduce violence; protect people and key institutions; promote political processes conducted without resort to armed violence; allow the delivery of basic services to affected people; and promote the development of institutions which foster societal resilience.”

difficult to monitor and evaluate (Blair and Fitz-Gerald, 2009, p. 25; Stepputat and Greenwood, 2013, p. 5). Moreover military assessments tend to be classified (expert comment).

The available evaluations point out the shortcomings with experiences of implementing multi-agency approaches to date (OECD, 2011). Much of the literature focuses on describing the challenges faced by whole-of-government stabilisation operations, rather than on identifying what has worked where.

Nevertheless the literature does identify some lessons learned and principles of good practice. These include:

- **Overcoming common challenges:** establishing transparent processes to identify and manage tensions and trade-offs between neutral humanitarian assistance and other military objectives; dealing with gaps in integrated strategic frameworks, civilian capabilities and government cultural and procedural coherence; and recognising the limitations of overly-ambitious, top-down, linear approaches.
- **Fostering local ownership:** aligning to shared national frameworks of political, security and development objectives; working to strengthen the capacity of national institutions; building more constructive state-society relations; creating more comprehensive 'whole-of-society' approaches that include civil society actors.
- **Establishing inter-agency structures:** learning from experiences with initiatives such as inter-agency boards, permanent inter-agency units and inter-agency funding pools; considering how to effectively integrate contributions from a greater range of government bodies.
- **Using joint processes:** using joint analysis and planning to foster inter-ministerial understanding and implementation; improving the integration of political analysis and using plans to inform programming; securing high-level commitment for dedicated resources and broad participation in monitoring and evaluation.
- **Operationalising the approach:** considering differentiated application of the whole-of-government approach, where the intensity and degree of cooperation varies according to the mode of operation, subject area, and level of implementation (Baumann, 2013)

It has been difficult to find empirically-based evidence of the outcomes of civil and military leadership in different contexts. Instead this rapid review has found discussions of the effects of military leadership in individual stabilisation operations. Recommendations include improving civil-military coordination through clear structures for coordination and leadership and consistent, strategic engagement to establish mutual understanding; and investing in civilian capacity to take the operational lead in whole-of-government stabilisation approaches.

2. Best practice and lessons learned in multi-agency stabilisation operations

Common challenges

A fundamental and widely debated challenge facing whole-of-government approaches is how to manage different, sometimes contradictory, rationales for engaging in fragile states. In particular, how civil-military interaction deals with the tension between neutral, impartial provision of humanitarian assistance and

political, strategic military objectives (Svoboda, 2014). The OECD (2011) recommends establishing clear and transparent processes to identify and manage such trade-offs.

Several reviews identify other common challenges faced by whole-of-government approaches to stabilisation operations. Looking across different governmental experience, Blair and Fitz-Gerald (2009, p. 15) find that the literature identifies three primary challenges: *a strategic gap* affecting the integration of political, security and development strategies at the planning and prioritisation stage; *a civilian gap* of inadequate capabilities and capacities at the implementation stage; *a cultural gap* impeding integration across government, with gaps in principles, policies and practice. Similar challenges are identified by a review of literature on the US experience (Serefino et al, 2012).

Other literature highlights that some whole-of-government stabilisation approaches have been weakened by unrealistic goals and ambitions that are more visionary than strategic (Stepputat and Greenwood, 2012), and by an assumption that they can be implemented in a linear way, through top-down technocratic, management structures (Dennys and Fitz-Gerald, 2011).

Local ownership

Stepputat and Greenwood's review finds that donor governments' whole-of-government approaches can be undermined by in-country lack of coordination between multiple civil and military, international and national actors (2012, p.28). OECD (2011) finds that implementation of donors' whole-of-government approaches is most effective when aligned to **national frameworks** of political, security and development objectives (e.g. the Agenda for Change in Sierra Leone, the Poverty Reduction Strategies in the DRC and Liberia, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in South Sudan). The OECD recommends, even in the immediate aftermath of conflict, "a comprehensive effort to strengthen the capacity of relevant national institutions" to articulate such frameworks (OECD, 2011, p. 31). The UN provides guidance on how to identify, support and develop national capacity in these situations (UN, 2011).

The UK Stabilisation Unit's principles for whole-of-government stabilisation put understanding and working with **local politics** at the centre of their approach (Stabilisation Unit, 2014a). They highlight the importance of building more constructive state-society relationships, including by understanding drivers of instability and how these play out in local relationships. Several reviewers find that whole-of-government approaches have had limited contact with local civil society organisations, and recommend a more comprehensive "whole-of-society" approach that actively engages with local stakeholders, building legitimacy and local capacity for good governance (Schirch in Franke and Dorff, 2012; Flavin in Franke and Dorff, 2012). A focus on local ownership, along with a flexible, not overly linear operational management that responds to political factors, is seen as a key driver behind the success of "cutting edge" security sector and justice reform programmes (in Burundi funded by the Dutch, and in Sierra Leone funded by DFID) (Stepputat and Greenwood, 2012).

Inter-agency structures

Analysts point out that the effective institutional set-up for whole-of-government approaches is shaped by a government's particular political culture, legal framework and financial resources; there is no single "best" solution (Below and Belzile, 2013, p. 37). However, analysts concur that an important starting point is **clear political guidance and leadership** to drive inter-ministerial buy-in (OECD, 2006; Below and Belzile, 2013; Habeck in Franke and Dorff, 2012).

An **authoritative interagency board** dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding (as in the UK, Denmark and Canada) can play an important role in supporting high level leadership (Below and Belzile, 2013, p. 37). Typical responsibilities of such a board could include selecting high priority countries, reviewing early warning analysis and determining funding allocations for crisis response (ibid.).

Permanent interagency units can be effective service providers (such as the UK's Stabilisation Unit and the Stabilisation and Reconstruction Task Force (START) in Canada, and, to a lesser extent, the Stabilisation Secretariat in Denmark) (ibid.). They help facilitate early warning and conflict analysis and support rapid crisis response. An older analysis finds that while such standing units can be effective, many have lacked the bureaucratic, financial and political weight of the main departments who may resist coordination (Patrick and Brown, 2007, p.4). This is a greater risk when new units are created from scratch (as in the UK and the US) and less so when the units are built on existing bureaucratic structures and mechanisms of interagency coordination (as in Canada) (ibid.).

A **dedicated fund** for stabilisation operations can stimulate inter-ministerial cooperation (Below and Belzile, 2013). Below and Belzile (2013) recommend that such a fund should have a mix of ODA and non-ODA funding; an independent budget line; a clear focus on interdisciplinary activities that add value to existing county programmes; and a high-level inter-agency board responsible for strategy setting, spending allocation, and central oversight (ibid., p. 37). Stewart and Brown (2007) also recommend creating fast-disbursing resource windows for rapid crisis responses.

The operational experience of such funds has not always gone smoothly. For example, the UK's Conflict Pool has been criticised for high transaction costs, leading DFID to prefer to use its own conflict-dedicated resources (Steppentat and Greenword, 2012, p. 26). The 2012 ICAI evaluation of the UK Conflict Pool recommends that it focuses on its comparative advantage of being able to mobilise assistance for unstable areas, fund pilot projects and use non-ODA or a combination with ODA (ICAI, 2012). Turning to Danish experience, the 2014 evaluation of the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund found that it had driven progress in cross-government working on stabilisation but recommended stronger strategic oversight and guidance, and re-investment in human resources to administer the fund (Coffey, 2014).

Other reviews highlight that some governments have attempted to broaden their whole-of-government approach through involving a **greater range of government bodies**. A report by EPCDM finds that the Netherlands' attempt to widen their whole-government approach beyond diplomacy, defence and development is noteworthy (Hauck and Rocca, 2014, p. 43). Depending on the context, the Netherlands' whole-of-government stabilisation approach may include the Ministry of Security and Justice and a variety of instruments (including, for example the Royal Military Police and trade relations).

Joint processes

Analysis and Planning

Analysts find that joint analysis and planning can foster inter-ministerial understanding and implementation (Baumann, 2013, p. 2; Blair and Fitz-Gerald, 2009, p. 25; Below and Belzile, 2013). Baumann (2013, p. 2) finds that the UK experience in Afghanistan shows that all participants must reach agreement on the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved. This analysis can then inform a common conceptual framework that will act as the basis for detailed implementation plans within individual departments (ibid.)

Stepputat and Greenwood's (2013, p. 22) review of experiences in cross-departmental analysis identifies challenges. These include: speeding up processes; incorporating analysis of the complexity of local contexts; utilising local knowledge; and ensuring the analysis is applied to programming decisions. Further lessons can be learned from UK experience in whole-of-government stabilisation planning. A tri-departmental analysis of governance and conflict in Sudan highlights that limited strategic ownership can impact on cross-departmental input (Stabilisation Unit, 2014a). Planning for a Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit in Afghanistan proved that having personnel with a military background within the inter-departmental unit can aid collaboration with the military planning team (Stabilisation Unit, 2014a).

Monitoring and evaluation

There are several attempts to set out key principles for monitoring and evaluating (M&E) whole-of-government stabilisation approaches:

- OECD (2012) sets out general best practice for evaluating peace-building activities in conflict-affected and fragile situations. It notes that evaluations of integrated stabilisation operations have to coordinate and manage a great variety of actors from diverse backgrounds in difficult environments (ibid., p. 45).
- Whalan (2014) reviews emerging evaluation practices specifically for integrated security and development missions. Whalan's key recommendations include ensuring that such evaluations are independent; develop context-driven standards of success and failure; balance methodological rigour with pragmatism; disaggregate across goals and over time to understand causal process; and assess unintended consequences.
- The UK Stabilisation Unit finds that M&E must be integrated into the planning, implementation and reporting processes. This requires senior level commitment; dedicated human and financial resources; and broad participation from the involved cross-government departments (Stabilisation Unit, 2014b, p. 7). It draws lessons from two case studies: one from Afghanistan which shows how an M&E system will struggle to demonstrate impact if its overarching purpose is not well-defined, and one from Somalia showing how a relatively small programme can catalyse broader engagement from the international community (ibid.).

Operationalising the approach

The OECD 2011 evaluation of whole-of-government stabilisation approaches laments that many remain "paper tigers": written into strategies but with limited implementation (OECD, 2011, p. 15). Stepputat and Greenwood (2013, p. 24) highlight that even the UK, generally seen as having a reasonably well-structured and coherent strategic institutional set-up for its whole-of-government approach, has had difficulties in developing integrated approaches in practice. Commonly, bureaucratic and cultural gaps between government departments can impede reforms for joined-up working, with evaluations referring to "unnecessary [inter-agency] turf battles" (in an evaluation of the 2012-13 joint US Department of States-USAID conflict prevention initiative in Kenya by Smiddy et al, 2013, p. 2). As Baumann (2013, p. 3) puts it, "In principle, all are in favour of "more coordination" – but no one wants to be coordinated."

Baumann (2013, p. 3) recommends a **differentiated application** of the whole-of-government approach, where the intensity and degree of cooperation is allowed to vary according to mode of operation, subject area, and level of implementation. Her recommendations include:

- Avoiding overly rigid planning parameters, evaluation criteria, and timeframes that do not allow for diverse working methods and organisational cultures.
- Avoiding high transaction costs of elaborate internal consultations for every area of operation, and agreeing shared criteria to identify focus countries and areas where cross-departmental cooperation is critical.
- Investing in strategic agreement (which can be aided by financial and administrative incentives e.g. shared budget items, promotional criteria based on cross-departmental work), but allowing single agency lead for implementation when appropriate.

3. Evidence on civil and military leadership

Literature on whole-of-government stabilisation identifies leadership as an area that requires particular attention (Blair and Fitz-Gerald, 2009, p. 24). Often there tends to be a lack of clarity in stabilisation operations of which specific entity, agency or government department serves as lead agent (ibid.). Blair and Fitz-Gerald identify the need for political commitment across donor governments to identify the appropriate models of leadership to best facilitate stabilisation efforts (ibid., p. 25).

It has been difficult to find empirically-based evidence of the effect of civil and military leadership in different contexts. Instead this rapid review has found discussions of the effects of military leadership in individual stabilisation experiences, in particular those of Afghanistan and Iraq (e.g. in Jackson and Haysom, 2013; Blair and Fitz-Gerald, 2009; Hall, 2010; Stephenson in Franke and Dorff, 2012; Meijer, 2012; Mölling, 2008). These bring to the fore three concerns with the increasing role of the military in traditionally civilian areas of aid and development: 1) whether the military has the right skills and credibility to be cooperative partners; 2) whether military engagement will erode neutral humanitarian space; and 3) whether military engagement will crowd out nascent civilian leadership and capacity.

In their review of the literature on civil-military coordination, Metcalfe et al (2012, p. 29) find that the literature offers the following suggestions for **how to improve the relationship** between military and humanitarian actors: 1) consistent efforts to develop and resource clear structures and mechanisms for coordination and leadership, particularly within the humanitarian community, 2) investment over time to establish a relationship, explore areas of common ground, establish boundaries and increase mutual understanding. They find that experiences in Pakistan, Haiti, DRC and Afghanistan are not perfect but demonstrate how a more constructive relationship between the two communities can be built.

Recommendations from research of civil–military interaction in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Timor-Leste and Pakistan include “consistent and strategic engagement both at headquarters and in the field” between military and humanitarian actors, to foster agreement on core issues of responsibility and competence, while recognising differences in approach and objectives (Svoboda, 2014, p. 1). The South Sudan report from this research further highlights that establishing coordination structures and mechanisms is not sufficient for effective civil–military coordination; strong leadership among civilian and military actors is crucial (Fenton and Loughna, 2013).

The literature also highlights the gap in **civilian capacity** to take the operational lead on whole-of-government stabilisation (Blair and Fitz-Gerald, 2009, p. 24). Governments have taken different approaches to developing civilian capacity, through setting up rosters of readily deployable trained experts (Switzerland, Norway), creating separate civilian crisis management centres combining research, training and recruitment (Germany, Japan), and inter-agency departments supported by internal civil service

'cadre' of stabilisation advisers and external rosters of experts (Canada, UK, US) (ibid.). Blair and Fitz-Gerald (2009, p. 18) make a number of recommendations as these initiatives are embedded, including: sharing lessons and good practice across bilateral and multilateral countries; monitoring stabilisation experiences to inform training content; and expanding training curricula to address planning and operational responses requirements in a range of different instability contexts.

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Expert contributors

Alexis Below, Brandenburg Institute for Society and Security
Boel Marcks von Würtemberg, Stabilisation Unit

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