STATES OF FRAGILITY: STABILISATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Workshop Summary
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MAY 2010 WORKSHOP REPORT
The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) and Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)[1]

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peace-building and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) organised a two day workshop on Stabilisation and Humanitarian Action. Generously supported by Folke Bernadotte Academy[2], the aim of the workshop was to bring together critical scholars, policy experts, humanitarian practitioners and government representatives to review the "state" of stabilisation and its impacts on humanitarianism. The workshop was also designed to give authors of a peer-reviewed journal and edited volume an opportunity to share their experiences, learn across cases, and plan for future outputs for the "states of fragility" project. A Special Issue of the journal *Disasters* will be published this year (forthcoming 2010) with a possible edited volume accompanying the special issue in 2011.

Summary of the Discussion

Stabilisation operations are being fielded in a widening array of so-called "fragile states" by a host of western governments and other national actors. While not easily defined, they often involve a combination of military, political, development and humanitarian objectives, resources and activities to tackle trans-national and domestic threats through short term security promotion. An expectation is that they will engender enabling conditions for transitional governance and ultimately development. The use of humanitarian and development resources as a means to support these goals is often resented by the humanitarian community which warns against securitising and politicizing relief assistance.

Yet the humanitarian sector has yet to properly engage with what stabilisation agenda. There is some disagreement about what it actually entails and whether stabilisation objectives are in fact supporting or hindering humanitarian operations and outcomes. These debates are growing more urgent since many humanitarian organisations are increasingly engaging in recovery, livelihoods support, peace-building and the protection of civilians in conflict contexts and situations other than war. At a minimum, a more sophisticated understanding of and engagement with 'stabilisation' is necessary for a more effective and strategic positioning.

I- Opening Presentations

The opening presentation situated the discourse, practice and outcomes of stabilisation. It considered recent debates on civil-military relations and donor enthusiasm for "whole of government" and "integrated" responses to fragility (e.g. 3D, 3C and WoG/WoS approaches). The first presentation noted the increasing integration of stabilisation policies into national and international policy responses in so-called fragile states.[3] In addition to examining the evolution of concepts of fragility and stabilisation, it placed particular emphasis on the stabilisation and humanitarianism nexus. The presentation introduced a general research question that set the stage for the workshop discussion:

> *"What is the discourse, practice, and outcomes of stabilisation and how does it affect humanitarian action?"*

The second presentation challenged some of the conventional myths associated with stabilisation. A major theme running through both the first and second – indeed all – sessions related to definitions. Stabilisation remains a confused and often obscure concept. The presentation thus focused on how the geographical, historical and policy boundaries of stabilisation are evolving (but also remaining the

same). It noted how despite assumptions that stabilisation is somehow a "new" bundle of practices, they also reflect a much longer-term preoccupation of donors with "fragile" contexts. Stabilization also reflects in many ways a preoccupation with asymmetrical warfare and pacification strategies.

Likewise, the expectation that stabilisation is always "short-term" was also challenged. Most scholars and practitioners have described stabilization as taking place in the first few years after war. But this focus must also be offset by the fact that it stabilization is often part and parcel of a wider transformative agenda of peacebuilding and statebuilding, such as in Afghanistan. These conceptual ambiguities can generate contradictions. Indeed, there is still a lack of clarity amongst proponents of stabilisation about who should be involved, how they should be coordinated and when stabilisation ends. This lack of clarity has in some ways hindered explicit humanitarian engagement with stabilisation. As such, the agenda is often greeted with hostility and derision.

The discussion following the opening presentations than focused on the selection of case studies of stabilisation. There are in fact well over a dozen stabilisation operations underway, thus presenting many opportunities for natural experiments and field research. The current case studies for the "states of fragility" project include Afghanistan, Colombia, Haiti, Pakistan, Somalia and Timor-Leste). But the importance of considering other cases was raised, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra

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[3] See also the forthcoming paper, Collinson, S., Elhawary, S. and R. Muggah. 2010. "States of fragility: Stabilisation and its Implications for Humanitarian Action", Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute. See also www.themarknews.com/articles/250-states-of-fragility

Leone and Yemen as well as other historical case studies such as Malaya, Algiers, Vietnam and the like.

The workshop participants all agreed that how stabilisation is defined will ultimately determine the character of engagement by the humanitarian sector. Stabilisation operations can be thought of as running on a continuum or in a typology: from short-term interventions connected to liberal peace-building to more transformative agendas linked to power holding elites and designed to promote conditions for meaningful security and development after a political settlement. While the participants agreed not to put a hard and fast definition on the concept, there was a sense that stabilisation as an epiphenomenon did exist, that its effects (particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq) were being felt, and that the humanitarian community must engage in the debate or be side-stepped altogether.

II- Critical Review of the HPG Working Paper on Stabilisation and Humanitarian Action

A recurring theme during the workshop related to the relative "newness" of the stabilisation phenomenon and its place in a wider historical context. All participants agreed that stabilisation, by emphasizing military force and seeking a liberal peace through illiberal means, led to an association with counter-insurgency. Also noted was the way standard definitions of stabilisation strongly overlap with current western donor policy agendas, such as 3D, 3C or the WoG/WoS

approaches. In contrast to historical cases of stabilisation, including Algeria and Vietnam, contemporary supporters of stabilisation have expanded and include national, bilateral and multilateral military actors, development agencies, humanitarian organisations and private firms.

Participants noted that many aid agencies are often not ready to embrace the concept of stabilisation for ideological, intellectual or mandate-related reasons. Ideologically, stabilisation runs contrary to the principles of humanitarian action (humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence). Yet for multi-mandate agencies, many of their objectives overlap with stabilisation which creates confusion and ambiguity for the humanitarian community at large, which mainly adopts a wider definition of humanitarianism yet maintains a discourse of adhering to core principles.

Representatives of governments warned against confusing the "stabilisation agenda" narrowly with the bureaucratic manifestations of stabilisation. For example, experts noted the considerable gap between the wider aspirations and machinations of stabilisation and the capacity of stabilisation units which are essential "civilian rosters". Critical scholars and others should thus adopt a nuanced assessment of the mandates, the staffing, and the budget lines as well as the political understandings of such units with regard to stabilisation. Participants also explored how stabilisation fits – it at all – with wider concerns related to

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ownership and legitimacy in relation to the Paris Declaration and other development principles. Can stabilisation be "owned" in any fundamental sense? Are the experiences of Colombia and Sri Lanka examples of stabilisation discourse and practice being appropriated?

Notwithstanding these and other challenges, some participants conceded that stabilisation is a useful concept. It serves a heuristic device in highlighting multi-spectrum actions designed to achieve specific ends. Precisely because it is understood to be short-term and political in orientation, it offers an honest acknowledgment as to what actors are trying to achieve and its objectives are not obfuscated in wider and more complex agendas such as peacebuilding and statebuilding.

The role of non-Western actors in stabilisation was highlighted as was the shift from the post-cold war liberal peace agenda ("do it our way") to the post 9/11 approach ("do it your way"). This may also reflect the growth of powers such as Brazil, China, India and South Africa that are in some cases undertaking stabilisation at home and abroad. Overall all, participants agreed that there may in fact be multiple stabilisation agendas emerging. One monolithic approach is difficult to trace and it might be useful to clarify complex stabilisation activities in a typology or matrix. This would, at a minimum, allow actors to identify narrow and wide approaches.

III- Case Study Sessions

Somalia is the site of multiple complex stabilisation efforts and also one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. There is virtually no humanitarian space in the context of contemporary stabilisation efforts, particularly due to decades of chronic violence and more recently, restrictions imposed by terrorist lists and high levels of insecurity. The use of aid as a stabilisation tool is not new in Somalia but is possibly less effective now due to the fact that the economy is more dependent on remittances rather than aid. Tensions between the 'stabilisers' and 'humanitarians' largely stem from the fact that humanitarians are seen as politically naive and to have been co-opted by different factions; stabilisation efforts, on the other hand, are deemed to support those that are responsible for continuing violence and humanitarian needs. In Somalia, stabilisation is regarded as a "conflict-producing" enterprise whilst humanitarianism is accused of profiting from the absence of the state as it provides them with an "accountability free zone".

The discussion focused on the multiple and contradictory objectives of stabilisation since 9/11 and the need to 'de-conflict' them. It also focused on the lack of humanitarian advocacy in contrast to the strong voices advocating for counter-terrorism and state-building objectives. Finally, the discussion considered how stability has emerged in Somaliland due to the awareness of clan leadership to early conditions and subsequently filling the political vacuum left by the state.

In the case of **Afghanistan,** the UK's model of stabilisation, with an emphasis on a 'whole of government' approach, was situated as a response to the planning failures in Iraq. It started as a reconstruction model but due to increasing levels of insecurity transformed itself in a military offensive to control territory. Its relationship with humanitarian assistance is linked to debates around service delivery and the view that in fragile contexts, providing services can enhance state legitimacy. This has had some successes but has been undermined by the absence of an inclusive political settlement and a lack of understanding about what actually brings about stability.

Stabilisation as a counterinsurgency strategy was a main point of the subsequent discussion. It was questioned whether the military are simply using stabilisation in order to give itself new roles in the current post-9/11 era. Further questions focused on the role of civil society and whether alliances and coalitions from the bottom up where being sufficiently sought in order to gain legitimacy. It was further acknowledged that there are divisions between actors in Afghanistan on what stabilisation is and how it should be pursued. It was also noted that the perspective of local people on the ground may also differ extensively, as they many benefit from continuing instability. It may be useful to consider these contexts as 'wicked problems' (unsolvable) which therefore require a degree of realism and possibly more achievable outcomes.

For the case of **Timor-Leste,** the lack of a coherent understanding of what stabilisation actually means and entails is evident among different actors. Some see it is simply providing basic security whilst others use it to include state-building, peace-building and development activities. It has become a slogan devoid of actual meaning and is not rooted in local political realities. For example, stabilisation for the government of Timor-Leste does not follow liberal values and is something that can be bought or achieved through heavy police presence. The lack of a clear definition means there is incoherence in practice. Also, the vague and open ended definitions mean that creating metrics for success is virtually impossible. In fact, most 'stabilisation' projects are evaluated according to outputs rather than outcomes.

Moreover, it was questioned whether stabilisation can actually succeed if it does not work in Timor–Leste, which represents a relatively benign environment compared to places such as Afghanistan and Somalia. The discussion focused on the need for a clearer definition of stabilisation that outlines key objectives that can be measured. This could help determine the right levels of resources and staff skills and capacities needed to succeed. Also, any realistic chance of achieving stabilisation must take into account local perspectives that may understand 'stability' in different ways. At the moment it is very much an international discourse.

The case of **Sri Lanka** illustrated that the Western model of stabilisation is neither the only existing model nor necessarily the most successful in terms of achieving short to medium term objectives. Liberal peace-building

failed in 2002-2003 as the international community supported a peace process that bypassed some of the hard political issues and focused instead on economic liberalisation and democracy. There were fears that this might lead to secession and the Sri Lankan government sought a different stabilisation model that emphasised the use of force (illiberal peace-building). This involved a strong military offensive and presence, use of 'war on terror' legislation and tactics to maintain control and implementing large reconstruction and development projects that sought to create peace-dividends and by pass a renegotiated political settlement. Donors have responded differently. Those with most concern over the humanitarian consequences have little leverage and bigger donors, such as the US, have supported the process along with other 'non-traditional' donors. This model has seen significant coherence between strategies but questions remain on their sustainability due to the absence of an inclusive political settlement.

During the discussion, the role of development in supporting stabilisation was discussed and why it seems to have been successful in Sri Lanka and not in other contexts such as Afghanistan. This was linked to the nature of the political settlement and levels of legitimacy, albeit an 'exclusive legitimacy'. Based on the different model of stabilisation in Sri Lanka, it was suggested to define stabilisation as *powerful political actors focusing and mobilising military, diplomatic and development resources in order to forge a particular political settlement and in so doing seeking to overcome challenges to that settlement*.

This would allow for other models of stabilisation to be included.

For the case of **Colombia**, the continuing presence and influence of the FARC and drug cartels represent the main challenges to stability. The government has adopted the narrow Western stabilisation model but without a commitment to a comprehensive peace-building agenda. It has used the global 'war on terror' as a means to curtail the legitimacy of non-state armed actors and limit the role of civil society including humanitarian actors. The government has been successful in reducing levels of violence and improving security in the main urban areas, but not for those displaced. Furthermore, the military have not been able to successfully 'hold' cleared areas and civilians have faced retribution from guerrillas. Stabilisation has generated significant challenges for the humanitarian community, as some feel they should support the government as it is not a fragile state and its efforts to extend its presence are legitimate, whilst other emphasise the need for neutrality and impartiality, despite the ability to be principled is constrained.

The discussion focused on the historical evolution of stabilisation and how it has changed since 'la violencia' (1950s). In this way, stabilisation is not entirely new but rather a new form of pacification carried out according to a more western model of 'clear, hold and build' through integrated action. The degree of US influence was discussed and whilst this is considerable. It as agreed that the Colombian government could not be readily classified as a "client state"

since it is in the driving seat with respect to setting and implementing domestic policy. The role of humanitarians was highlighted and particularly the reluctance of the UN to confront the government on its reluctance to accept that there is an armed conflict and on constraining humanitarian access.

Stabilisation efforts for **Pakistan** were outlined in the context of the 2005 earthquake and the "war on terror". The US' high profile engagement in the response was partly an attempt to 'win the hearts and minds' of the Pakistan population, which raises questions with regards to the neutrality of assistance. Religious groups were also engaged in the relief effort and whilst the US 'hearts and minds' campaign meant they did not initially seek to stop their role, they later sought to pressure the government. In the context of current stabilisation efforts, close engagement with the military largely stems from the precedent set during the earthquake response but also from the influence of the military in Pakistani governance.

In the discussion, it was agreed that humanitarians also exert comparatively limited leverage. This is due in part to donor commitments to a wider project of stabilisation and the UN's reluctance to confront the government in order not to damage relations for medium to longer term development engagement. The success of stabilisation largely depends on a regional perspective – ranging from US engagement with militias and the wider Af-Pak strategy to Pakistan's interest in sustaining certain groups in relation to its influence in Kashmir

and Afghanistan. This disjuncture between the disparate objectives of stabilisation was a subject of the discussion. A regional perspective was considered vital to understand the challenges involved and identify where different actors might be working at cross purposes. Some humanitarians wondered whether the precedent set during the earthquake response (of working with the Pakistani military) was avoidable.

In **Haiti**, stabilization was front and centre from 2004 onwards. The integrated stabilization mission in Haiti (MINISTAH) was designed to consolidate stability from the beginning. The presentation provided an overview of the 'history' of geopolitical interest in the country (from containing refugees and counter-narcotics to re-establishing security and welfare institutions of the state). It also reviewed how stabilization in Haiti has become a "crowded field": with more than 40 donor countries and thousands of NGOs, the country has earned the sobriquet of "The Republic of NGOs".

Intriguingly, in Haiti, there are parallel stabilization activities being pursued by different actors. These include the Haiti Stabilization Initiative (HSI) adopted by the US in Cité Soleil, the integrated security and development activities supported by Canada, Norway and a Brazilian NGO in Bel Air, and the MINUSTAH-led crack-downs and community violence reduction efforts across Port-au-Prince. These activities share many of the same broad objectives, but differ widely in their approach and measurement of success. Interestingly, the humanitarian response to these

stabilization activities has been generally neutral to war – with most agreeing that it "opened" rather than "closed" the humanitarian space.

During the discussion, it was noted that Haiti faces a no-war/no-peace situation. In this context, intervention and stabilisation in the absence of civil war generated new forms of challenges (and opportunities) that distinguished Haiti from the other cases. Likewise, it potentially allowed humanitarians more "space" to engage and fewer risks of being politicized. The case of Haiti was compared to Kosovo in the context of a "mediated" or "enabling state".

IV- Humanitarian Perspectives on Stabilisation.

During the introductory remarks, a diagram was presented highlighting how the stabilisation agenda is strongly overlapping with other policy arenas. The idea was to demonstrate how stabilization transcends peacebuilding, recovery, reconstruction and statebuilding, but is also separate. Likewise, the diagram demonstrated how humanitarians are also engaged in activities that extend well beyond "life saving" intervention.

A follow-on question was whether humanitarians should (or should not) pro-actively engage with stabilisation if it can in fact achieve humanitarian outcomes? There was no simple answer. Rather, it was felt the question was premature. The continued lack of clarity of what stabilisation is and the fact that "success" in stabilization routinely involves illiberal means called for some caution. Nevertheless,

it was conceded that humanitarians themselves need to recognise that many 'humanitarian' agencies are not purely humanitarian.

The closing discussion focused on guidelines that exist to manage civil-military relations. It was noted that despite these, there are still many challenges with how to engage on wider questions of integration. Thus one of the biggest challenges confronting humanitarians is not about practical or routine engagement with the military, but rather strategic engagement with political actors and processes. This is one of the recurrent tensions of the humanitarian sector. At the very least, humanitarians must recognise the blurring boundaries humanitarian action and determine what kind of advocacy strategies are required.

Workshop Participants

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About the Workshop Report

This report is part of a research project on "States of Fragility: the Consequences of Stabilisation on Humanitarian Action" hosted at the CCDP. The project is a comparative assessment of the discourse, practice and outcomes of stabilisation interventions and humanitarian action in multiple countries. Coordinated by Dr. Robert Muggah, the project runs from 2010 to 2011 with support from the Folke Bernadotte Academy. Undertaken in collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the UK, case studies on stabilisation interventions are being carried out in Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Haiti, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Yemen and elsewhere with internationally recognised regional experts.

The CCDP is a research centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. It aims to offer policy relevant research built upon strong academic foundations on a variety of themes and issues, including: peacebuilding and reconciliation; post-conflict transitions and state-building; armed violence and development; and multi-stakeholder initiatives and the politics of monitoring and evaluation. The CCDP also participates in and supports a variety of outreach initiatives, including training modules, lectures and briefings, publications and other activities designed to disseminate the fruits of its research projects to relevant stakeholders beyond the academic community.

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