Stabilisation & Reconstruction:  
Definitions, Civilian Contribution & Lessons Learnt

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Request for Information: What are a range of definitions of stabilisation and reconstruction (S&R), particularly those used within civilian organisations? In what ways do civilian organisations contribute to S&R? What lessons learnt have been identified in relation to S&R?

Steps Taken in Response: Several members of the CFC’s Afghanistan Team reviewed key policy documents, studies and other materials pertaining to stabilisation and reconstruction (S&R). Given that this request specifically focused upon the civilian side of S&R, the CFC focused its review primarily on documents produced by civilian governmental organisations (GOs), international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Research on stabilisation and reconstruction (S&R) has been on the rise according to a recent journal article published by Sarah Collinson, Samir Elhawary and Robert Muggah in the journal Disasters. However, they also write that many humanitarian actors within the international community, including GOs, IOs and NGOs, have not been eager to adopt terms such as “stabilisation” or “stability operations”, which became associated with the US-led intervention into Iraq in 2003. The article states that many humanitarian agencies “seem hardly engaged with the stabilisation discourse, despite the potentially profound implications of this agenda for the political and security conditions shaping humanitarian crises and responses to them.” Hence, much of the definitional and conceptual work in this area has, until relatively recently, been taken up by the military and private-sector institutions. That said, historical research into S&R, which was also published in 2010 in a special edition of the journal Disasters, has recently demonstrated that civilian agencies, while often preferring language such as “peace keeping”, “peace support operations” or “post-conflict recovery”, have long been involved in what the military and some civilian agencies today refer to as S&R. Even the military, the historical study shows, has varied its preferred terminology over time, ranging from “pacification” in the Philippines and Vietnam to “full-spectrum operations”, “stability operations” and “stabilisation” more recently.
This document is focused upon identifying lessons learnt from among civilian agencies working on S&R. It begins with a discussion of how some civilian institutions have chosen to define S&R. Throughout this document it should be recognised that a number of different terms are used by different organisations, including stabilisation, stability operations, early recovery and reconstruction, are often conflated in S&R. Where these distinctions appear significant, the specific terminology used by a particular organisation is highlighted.

**Defining Stabilisation & Reconstruction**

Despite the increase in scholarly research into S&R the concept itself remains rather loosely defined, write Sultan Barakat, Sean Deely and Steven A. Zyck in an article entitled “‘A tradition of forgetting’: stabilisation and humanitarian action in historical perspective”. Or as a major report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) put it, “[t]he multiple institutions working side by side in S&R missions do not share” common definitions or understandings for how different stakeholder view S&R differently. The NATO Stabilisation Force (SFOR) formerly operating in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the ongoing United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) have not been guided by specific definitions of stabilisation or S&R. As Barakat, Deely and Zyck note, the lack of definitions has not necessarily resulted from institutional oversights but rather from organisations’ need to be able to adjust the methods and means they utilise in crisis-affected contexts such as Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere without being too heavily constrained by any one particular definition.

**Governmental Definitions.** The British government’s Stabilisation Unit – which uses the term stabilisation without necessarily referencing reconstruction at the same time – defines stabilisation as “the process of establishing peace and security in countries affected by conflict and instability” and as “the promotion of a peaceful political settlement to produce a legitimate indigenous government, which can better serve its people”. Noting that the goals of stabilisation are political – in that they aim to facilitate a political settlement among local actors in conflict – the Stabilisation Unit relies upon an objective rather than a set of activities to frame its definition. However, the Stabilisation Unit does note the following: “Stabilisation often requires external joint military and civilian support to perform some or all of the following tasks: prevent or reduce violence, protect people and key institutions, promote political processes and prepare for longer-term development.” Such a definition mirrors the British military’s Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, which defines stabilisation as:

“The process that supports states which are entering, enduring or emerging from conflict, in order to prevent or reduce violence; protect the population and key infrastructure; promote political processes and governance structures, which lead to a political settlement that institutionalises non-violent contests for power; and prepares for sustainable social and economic development.”

The US Department of State’s Office for the Coordination for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) does not propose a specific definition of S&R (or R&S, as it terms it). However, the mission of S/CRS is “to prevent or prepare for post-conflict situations, and to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife, so they can reach a sustainable path toward peace, democracy and a market economy.” The Canadian government’s Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) also does not appear, based on a review of the resources available, to put forward a singular definition. Its “vision” is “to build durable peace and security in acutely fragile or crisis affected states identified as priorities for the Government of Canada.” Here one sees another objective-oriented definition rather than one which specifies the specific means to be employed. START also defines its work very clearly as, like S/CRS, as facilitating whole-of-government action and coordinating the range of national government institutions involved in order to enhance the effectiveness of interventions.
International Organisation Definitions. Based upon a review of existing documentation, international organisations have not taken up the language of stabilisation. The United Nations approaches S&R as part of its entire mandate – including development assistance, humanitarian relief, aid to displaced persons and so on. However, much of the UN’s work which corresponds to military notions of S&R emerges from the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). DPKO’s “Capstone Doctrine” provides a range of definitions for terms related to (though not necessarily overlapping with) S&R. These are outlined below, and each is a direct quote from the “Capstone Doctrine”.

- **Peacebuilding**: Measures aimed at reducing the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict, by strengthening national capacities for conflict management, and laying the foundations for sustainable peace.
- **Peace Enforcement**: Coercive action undertaken with the authorization of the United Nations Security Council to maintain or restore international peace and security in situations where the Security Council has determined the existence of a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression.
- **Peacekeeping**: Action undertaken to preserve peace, however fragile, where fighting has been halted and to assist in implementing agreements achieved by the peacemakers.
- **Peace Operations**: Field operations deployed to prevent, manage, and/or resolve violent conflicts or reduce the risk of their recurrence.

Another major international institution that has engaged overtly with the language of stability and stabilisation is the European Union, which introduced its Instrument for Stability (IfS) mechanism in 2007. The 2010 IfS Annual Report notes that its primary goal is “to help prevent and respond to crisis or emerging crisis and create a safe and stable environment”. Specifically, the IfS website notes that EU institutions will use IfS to engage in activities such as the following: “support to mediation, confidence building, interim administrations, strengthening Rule of Law, transitional Justice or the role of natural resources in conflict”.

**Other Definitions & Competing Terminology.** Beyond the GO and IO definitions noted above, there are few other definitions of S&R which are widely in use. One of the perhaps more direct definitions is provided by Oxfam Great Britain. Its written submission for the UK National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review presents a view of stabilisation which revolves primarily around security sector reform (SSR) and judicial reform in conflict-affected contexts. Oxfam’s definition of S&R, its submission notes, is heavily dependent on long-term, sustainable development assistance; the document repeatedly rejects quick-impact projects. Oxfam suggests that the best form of S&R involves promoting development in a manner which leads to long-term improvements in living conditions and, hence, long-term stability.

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1 See for instance the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).
Other definitions are rarely proposed by civilian organisations. Even where many other civilian organisations do refer to stabilisation, the term is used in a different manner. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance, refer to stabilisation in economic terms, as the prevention of inflation and institution of sound macro-economic policies.

Research such as that by Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah shows that stabilisation, in particular, is a concept which in many ways overlaps with a range of other topics and types of interventions, including counter-insurgency (COIN), counter-terrorism, state-building, humanitarian action, early recovery and peace-building (see Figure 1). While such comments are perhaps too broad to be reviewed in this document, those interested in further elaborating thinking on S&R would require an awareness of these peer concepts and how they are both separate from and reflected within current S&R models.

**Figure 1. Overlapping Concepts Related to Stabilisation & Reconstruction**


**Towards A Consensus Definition.** The previously discussed historical review of S&R proposes a definition of stabilisation that includes those currently used by civilian and military organisations. The authors of that study suggest that stabilisation be viewed as:

“a process combining combat (including COIN and irregular warfare) with humanitarian, reconstruction or development support during or in the immediate aftermath of a violent conflict, in order to prevent the continuation or recurrence of conflict and destabilising levels of violence.”
Such a definition, which does not include reconstruction, may provide one option for moving forward discussion among relevant civilian and military actors working on these issues.

**Lessons Learnt in S&R**

The following lessons learnt have been extracted from a range of leading studies of S&R which have been undertaken by think tanks and civilian organisations. They are presented in no particular order. All sources are noted in the table; in several instances a lesson learnt was included in a number of publications.

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<tr>
<th>Lesson 1:</th>
<th>Local security forces may be unwilling, unavailable or unable to tackle lawlessness in the immediate aftermath of a conflict.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details:</td>
<td>After major combat operations, law and order must be ensured immediately despite the fact that local security forces may be unwilling, unavailable or unable to provide law enforcement.</td>
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<th>Lesson 2:</th>
<th>Building democracy requires an understanding of a country’s local history and culture.</th>
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<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Challenge of Stabilization and Reconstruction: How to Improve International Cooperation, Conference Report</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Guidelines Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction, Manual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details:</td>
<td>In order to build democracy in post-conflict states, a solid understanding of the sociocultural local context is vital. In that sense, NGOs, as a result of their on-going presence in the country, have an advantage in terms of socioeconomic, cultural and ethincal knowledge. NMCG recommends the participation of NGOs in the pre-planning stages or in the pre-deployment briefings. Konrad Adenaure Stiftung, a research institute, recommends bottom-up and community-based approaches to foster local initiatives and solutions.</td>
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<th>Lesson 3:</th>
<th>Building host nation ownership and capacity is crucial.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Guidelines Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction, Manual</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How Should NATO Handle Stabilisation Operations and Reconstruction Efforts?, Policy Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details:</td>
<td>It is important to use host nation human resources whenever is possible and appropriate. In that way, the host nation capacity will be strengthened and developed. In addition, the state’s legitimacy amongst its citizenry will be promoted, and stabilisation and reconstruction operations will not be perceived as externally imposed.</td>
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<th>Lesson 4:</th>
<th>Training, equipping and supervising local police must be a priority in post-conflict S&amp;R operations.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar</td>
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It is crucial to involve international police advisors to train, equip and supervise local security forces. In that sense, there are positive examples from Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo. In Iraq, limited and ill-suited resources were made available for police training.

In addition, public safety cannot only relay on security force (e.g., the police) exclusively. A functioning and reliable justice sector, including courts and prisons, must be developed and promoted alongside police forces.

**Lesson 5:** Bring a “conflict lens” to all work, including technical projects.

**Sources:** Guidelines Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction, Manual

**Details:** All actions should be evaluated with regards to their impact on past and potential drivers of conflict. It is crucial to assess and understand all the political and social ramifications of any activity undertaken in a conflict-affected environment, including hiring, procurement and humanitarian aid delivery. While many actions (e.g. investigating war crimes or choosing where to locate an army base) may be overtly political and sensitive, many seeming innocuous or purely technical decisions in war-torn environments have an effect on the potential for renewed violence.

**Lesson 6:** Civilian and military agencies should coordinate efforts to strengthen governance.

**Sources:** Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar

**Details:** Good governance in the short and long-term is a must to achieve successful results in post-conflict environments. It is necessary to empower local actors from a technical and financial point of view (i.e., by providing them with adequate material resources and opportunities for capacity building). Such efforts must also be carefully coordinated in order to avoid over-burdening local actors or operating at cross purposes.

**Lesson 7:** Boundaries between political and humanitarian objectives have to be set.

**Sources:** Report of the NGO-Military Contact Group Conference: Stabilization and Civil-Military Relation in Human Response, Conference


Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons and Recommendations, Policy Paper

**Details:** Generally, proponents of S&R operations advocate for a fully integrated approach that links both civilian and military objectives and means/approaches. On the contrary, humanitarian organisations appeal for a clear differentiation between political and security objectives from purely humanitarian objectives. Their experience shows that failing to do so could jeopardize the safety of humanitarian actors on the ground (and their ability to operate), as they could be seen aligned to military security and political strategies.

**Lesson 8:** Building democracy requires locally-relevant approaches.

**Sources:** Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar


How Should NATO Handle Stabilisation Operations & Reconstruction Efforts?, Policy Paper
**Details:** Establishing democratic governance in post-conflict contexts is more than just building physical institutions such as ministries and subnational offices. Technical and financial capacity building must be provided via training and mentoring. Civil society should also be involved in this process in order to facilitate the acceptance of new concepts, social structures, values and institutions.

**Lesson 9:** Manage expectations, and set only those goals you can reasonably achieve.

**Sources:**
- Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What have we learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar
- Guidelines Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction, Manual

**Details:** High hopes and promises increase expectations and can create resentment when unmet. Furthermore, they can hide real small successes and progress. Hence, managing the perceptions and expectations of local population is important in order to maintain local support and involvement as well.

**Lesson 10:** Promoting private enterprise requires more than just removing barriers.

**Sources:**
- Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction: What have we learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?, Lessons Learnt Seminar
- Guidelines Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction, Manual

**Details:** Economic growth and private-sector development are key factors for successful S&R operations. In particular, generating employment is critical in order to ensure stability after conflicts and other crises. Improving access to finance and promoting business development services are just two types of activities which have been utilised to foster growth during and after conflicts.

**Lesson 11:** NGOs should be encouraged to collaborate and to establish networks in order to make their activities as effective as possible.

**Sources:**
- Post-war Reconstruction in Afghanistan & the Changing NGO-Government Relationship, Paper

**Details:** NGOs have played a positive role in many other post-war reconstruction contexts (e.g. Bosnia, Angola, and Mozambique). By establishing networks, NGOs can become more successful in dealing with donor agencies and with national government institutions. In addition, NGOs working together in Afghanistan were able to work with the military in order to ensure that military units involved in reconstruction work clearly and physically differentiated themselves from NGOs. Doing so significantly enhanced the security of NGOs.

**Lesson 12:** Capture and share lessons learnt in a common and systematic way.

**Sources:**

**Details:** NGOs, IO, GOs and military actors have different mechanisms to capture and disseminate lessons learnt. However, there is very little in information sharing amongst these stakeholders and between their lessons learnt databases. The NGO-Military Contact Group proposes the establishment of mechanisms to enable information sharing and lessons learning across organisational boundaries and between IOs, NGOs, GOs and military institutions.
Lesson 13: Socialisation and common training between military and civilian communities can help to strengthen S&R coordination and implementation.

Sources:

Details: Socialisation and common trainings help to foster relationships and mutual awareness, thus contributing to improved responses to crises as part of humanitarian relief and S&R operations.