

States of fragility: stabilisation and its implications for humanitarian action

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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFRICOM	United States African Command
CCAI	Coordination Centre for Integrated Action
CJTF-HOA	Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa
DFID	Department for International Development
DPKO	Department for Peace-Keeping Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MINUSTAH	United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti
MOSS	Minimal Operational Security Standards
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PHRP	Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
S/CRS	Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation
START	Stabilisation and Reconstruction Task Force
SU	Stabilisation Unit
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Introduction

The international policy context and circumstances of humanitarian action have seen some significant changes over the past decade. Relief and development agencies are operating in an increasingly diverse array of war-affected and difficult contexts, while donor government policy has evolved, reflecting a growing preoccupation with so-called weak and fragile states. These settings are considered to be sites of underdevelopment and human suffering, while presenting major threats to international peace and security. This evolution has led to a plethora of responses and interventions seeking to 'stabilise' and mitigate identified threats. These efforts typically involve integrating 'hard' and 'soft' forms of intervention – both military and civilian – implying an explicit securitisation and politicisation of North–South relations; in so doing, there is a strong perception within the humanitarian community that the ability of aid agencies to reach affected populations, and the ability of the vulnerable to access assistance and protection – so-called 'humanitarian space' – is contracting.

Most attention has focused on the large-scale international interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet if stabilisation is understood to mean a combination of military, humanitarian, political and economic instruments to bring 'stability' to areas affected by armed conflict and complex emergencies, it can be seen to have a far broader transformative, geographical and historical scope. Indeed, stabilisation is connected to a long and varied history of (liberal and illiberal) interventions in societies and states. Thus, current stabilisation efforts resemble past activities and represent only a subtly distinct chapter in a longer story.

This HPG Working Paper considers the implications of 'stabilisation' for international humanitarian action. Drawing on a series of background case studies conducted in 2009 and 2010, it argues that, while humanitarian actors have been most preoccupied with the growing engagement of the military in the humanitarian sphere, it is trends in international *political* engagement in these contexts that represent the more fundamental challenge.¹ Indeed, the

significance and implications of any military or strategic engagement are always defined by the political interests that underpin it. Likewise, 'peace' and 'stability' are themselves not value-neutral terms, and interventions often represent contested interests and ideologies (Goodhand, Sri Lanka case study). Nor is the humanitarian agenda itself apolitical. Despite broad attachment to principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality, humanitarian actors are political players, operating in complex political environments.

This paper begins by exploring the evolution and content of 'stabilisation' as a discourse and set of policies, and the challenges of translating these into practice. While powerful and increasingly pervasive, the exact purpose and character of the enterprise nevertheless remain vague and uncertain. At a minimum, stabilisation appears to be tied to security objectives associated with counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, counter-narcotics, transnational crime prevention and the containment of migration flows. Yet stabilisation usually incorporates a wider policy agenda than this, overlapping substantially with other policy areas, including peace-making, peace-building, peace-enforcement, state-building, human development and humanitarian action. 'Stabilisation' is thus both a conservative and potentially transformative, comprehensive and long-term project, involving substantial social, political and economic change. The open-ended nature of stabilisation allows for widely varying interpretations and applications. Whilst stabilisation as a term has been dominated by Western governments and shaped by their political and strategic interests and priorities, the discourse has also taken root within the UN and

stabilisation. They include Afghanistan (Stuart Gordon), Pakistan (Tahir Ali), Somalia (Ken Menkhaus), Colombia (Samir Elhawary), Haiti (Robert Muggah), Timor-Leste (Gordon Peake and Rob Muggah), Sri Lanka (Jonathan Goodhand), Iraq (Marcia Hartwell) and Burundi (Adam Forbes). The case studies drew principally on the authors' previous relevant research and existing knowledge of these contexts, supplemented with additional in-country field research conducted in 2009. This Working Paper is based on the analysis contained within the case studies and additional literature review and discussions and interviews carried out with a wide range of key informants during 2009 and early 2010. A modified version of this working paper and some of the case studies will be published in a Special Issue of the journal *Disasters* (forthcoming 2010).

1. The scope of the case studies reflects our understanding of the wider geographical and policy significance of

key regional organisations, and among a number of governments in conflict-affected countries keen to recast what might previously have been labelled civil wars or political crises as legitimate ‘stabilisation’ efforts (as illustrated by the case studies from Colombia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).

The paper then considers the relationship between ‘stabilisation’ and international humanitarian action. The exchange between the two sectors is highly uncertain and contentious, due not only to the controversies that surround stabilisation policies, but also to deep-seated ambiguities at the heart of humanitarianism. This is reflected in continuing tension between a recognition that humanitarian action cannot substitute for robust political and security engagement to address the causes of humanitarian crisis, and concern that humanitarian action might be compromised or co-opted by competing political and security objectives. Overall, the international humanitarian community remains highly diffident, defensive and sometimes openly hostile to much of what may be seen as falling under the banner of stabilisation. Anxiety within the humanitarian camp stems in part from uncertainty about the goals of humanitarian action itself, and whether these should be at least partly related to the kind of transformative interventions that stabilisation efforts might encompass. Although humanitarian action is often cast as part of the broader stabilisation puzzle, it does not make an easy fit.

The importance of looking beyond Iraq and Afghanistan is underlined by the fact that these two interventions are unlikely to offer precedents for future international stabilisation interventions. The ‘war on terror’, ‘preventive war’ and ‘regime

change’ were viewed by their US advocates as part of a longer-term shift in US strategy, but a number of factors – including the sheer cost, lack of evident success, waning domestic political support, international geopolitical constraints and strategic ‘overstretch’, aggravated by the financial crisis and economic recession – are likely to dissuade the leading Western powers from undertaking further highly ambitious interventions of this kind. This does not mean that stabilisation does not have a future, however, nor that it will not continue to impact powerfully on many of the crisis-affected contexts that are of humanitarian concern: the precise nature, scope and ambition of stabilisation may change, but powerful states’ political and strategic interest in ‘stabilising’ weaker states and contexts affected by war is likely to persist.

The concluding discussion considers what stabilisation might mean for humanitarian actors. Despite their unease, many humanitarian actors are involved in a wide range of activities that potentially overlap with various aspects of stabilisation, including short- to medium-term recovery, peace-building, development and human rights work. Any coherence between humanitarianism and these other spheres will be contingent on whether humanitarians trust the positive intent, impacts and outcomes of stabilisation efforts. If the US and other Western governments prioritise narrow security objectives over basic human welfare, humanitarian actors will almost certainly seek to resist – albeit tempered in some cases by continuing financial reliance on the donor governments leading the stabilisation charge.

2. Stabilisation: different things to different people

Stabilisation, as it is currently articulated and implemented by the US and other Western governments, is premised on an assumption that weak governance, instability, violent conflict and associated poverty and underdevelopment are a direct threat to their strategic interests and international peace and security more broadly. This is because ‘islands of instability’ are seen as constituting regional threats and a source of contagion, particularly in their apparent association with international terrorism, transnational crime and other dangers (see for example USAID, 2004; DFID, 2009; Muggah and Krause, 2009). While stabilisation is firmly rooted in security agendas focused on reducing or eliminating perceived threats, evolving experience of international intervention and engagement to end conflicts and foster peace and development over the past decade has emphasised the need to integrate military, political, development and humanitarian action (Brahimi, 2000; Macrae and Leader, 2000; OECD, 2006). In contexts as diverse as Afghanistan, Timor-Leste and Haiti, stabilisation has therefore emerged as a key component of a broader liberal, transformative peace-building project. As such, stabilisation extends beyond short-term or conservative objectives to eliminate immediate threats or to ‘stabilise’ situations of acute crisis to link action across a range of discrete policy spheres with the aim of reducing violence and establishing the political and social conditions necessary for recovery, reconstruction, development and a ‘lasting peace’. As emphasised by UK Defence Minister Liam Fox, ‘the primary reason for sending our armed forces to Afghanistan was one of national security ... But clearly, if we are to make the long-term gains that will provide the stability to maintain the momentum when our armed forces eventually hand over to the forces of the Afghans, we will require a long period of development in concert with the international authorities, the NGOs, and our and other countries’ aid programmes’.²

As a broader, transformative project, enhancing stability depends on pursuing a number of key parallel and connected goals, including creating a safe and secure environment, establishing the rule

of law, achieving stable (or at least good enough) governance and a viable market economy and promoting social and psychological well-being. Stabilisation policies generally rest on the now widely held assumption that counter-insurgency cannot be separated from politics (Kilcullen, 2009; Cornish, 2009) and that development and security are mutually reinforcing (see Duffield, 2001). As such, developmental interventions are also believed to bolster security by providing peace dividends and legitimising a host government or intervening force; security, in turn, creates the space to foster the longer-term development that is assumed to embed stability. This is premised on a liberal interpretation of war that views violence and instability as resulting from a lack of development and the order accorded by functional states (Cramer, 2006). The onset and severity of civil war are linked to poverty, inequality and an absence of opportunities, and constitute ‘a failure of development’ or ‘development in reverse’ (World Bank, 2003; emphasis in original). The logical policy response is therefore to promote and support development as a means to reduce violence and enhance peace and stability – what Zoellick (2008) has labelled ‘securing development’ and critical scholars describe as ‘securitising development’ (Duffield, 2007).

The fusion of security and development is reflected in a host of manuals and guidelines, including the United States Institute of Peace’s *Guiding Principles for Stabilisation and Reconstruction*. According to the Guiding Principles stabilisation ‘aims to prevent the renewal of violent conflict; conflict-sensitive development seeks to enable a long-lasting peace’ (USIP and PSKOl, 2009: 3). The Rand Corporation views stabilisation as incorporating ‘efforts to develop or redevelop institutions that foster self-governance, social and economic development’ (Bensahel et al., 2009: ix). These and other statements of doctrine are increasingly becoming received wisdom at the field level. In the case of Timor-Leste, for example, Peake and Muggah show how military and civilian actors frequently define the objective of their development and peace-building interventions as ‘bringing about stability’ (Peake and Muggah, East Timor case study). Likewise in Haiti, Muggah observes how the UN Stabilisation Mission (MINUSTAH) and initiatives supported by bilateral donors emphasise

2. ‘Liam Fox Calls for Afghan Mission To Be Scaled Back’, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2010.

development as a core stabilisation objective (Muggah, Haiti case study).

Without testing or challenging these basic assumptions, Western states have moved swiftly to incorporate development priorities and humanitarian assistance into their evolving military doctrine on stabilisation. The most recent US Army operations manual on Stability Operations, FM 3-07, emphasises the need for the military to move beyond 'kinetic' operations (military force) and engage alongside civilian experts in promoting stability and reconstruction. It describes how the US must invest in rebuilding local institutions, helping to restore essential services and safeguarding or 'protecting' vulnerable populations – activities placed 'at the core of military training, planning and operations' (Department of the Army, 2008: 15). The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has similarly stressed the central position of development assistance in its recent stabilisation doctrine. Stabilisation is understood as a process that seeks to 'prevent or reduce violence; protect the population and key infrastructure; promote political process and governance structures ... and prepare for sustainable social and economic development' (MoD, 2009: xv).

Although the term is rarely deployed in UN policy debates, the UN's peacekeeping doctrine and broader engagements in crisis contexts increasingly integrate security, politics, development and humanitarian assistance (Eide et al., 2005). UN peace support missions are to be supported by a new doctrine (the 'Capstone Doctrine') which reflects the fact that these missions are often required to play an active role in peacemaking, including enforcement action, and may also be involved in early peace-building activities (DPKO, 2008; Muggah, 2009a). As stated in UN peacekeeping principles and guidelines, these missions' core functions are to 'create a secure and stable environment while strengthening the State's ability to provide security... [and] facilitate the political process by promoting dialogue and reconciliation and supporting the establishment of legitimate and effective institutions of governance' (DPKO, 2008: 23). Meanwhile, certain governments are pursuing their own domestic 'stabilisation' campaigns: the Colombian government's Presidential Directive 01 of 2009, for example, seeks greater civil–military cooperation in order to use development to promote security in unstable areas (Elhawary, Colombia case study). Brazil has started to initiate

a combination of strategies to pacify and 'stabilise' fragile contexts that are of strategic interest (Muggah and Carvalho, 2009).

Despite these converging trends, the core objectives of stabilisation and the ways and means by which these objectives might be achieved remain deeply controversial, reflecting the competing mandates, priorities, interests and capacities of the many different actors involved. Overall, approaches are divided between, on the one hand, prioritising security imperatives and taking direct and immediate action to counter perceived threats such as insurgents or terrorists, or, on the other, pursuing wider peace-building, state-building and development goals. Where counter-insurgency has been the primary focus of engagement, stabilisation discourse has tended to favour a 'security first' approach, as in the US-led engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lindley-French, 2009). This focuses on the role of external actors in enforcing a political settlement through 'regime change' and the defeat of an insurgency, with the aim of creating conditions for a subsequent government-led transition towards peace. With security and stability as the primary objective, development and humanitarian activities are seen as a means to achieve these goals and ultimately to legitimise the host state and an internationally-sponsored political settlement (Gordon, Afghanistan case study). The British government's stabilisation discourse, however, has given greater weight to the importance of politics in contributing to a non-violent political settlement or interim accommodation (Stabilisation Unit, 2009). This may involve using military force to reduce violence and protect people, assets and institutions, but the central objective is supporting the development of a viable and legitimate state (*ibid.*). Yet the desire to build a state that is willing and able to maintain stability and counter transnational threats may undermine the development of a state that is accountable and legitimate. Whilst stabilisation efforts might succeed in putting the structures in place to mitigate a return to war or tackle a specific threat in the short term, they may depend on structures that are authoritarian in nature (Barnett et al., 2007).

A discourse that casts stabilisation as a means of achieving or supporting liberal peace-building objectives may obfuscate the core security priorities that underpin powerful actors' interventions. Stabilisation has varied guises in

different contexts, involving different combinations of military, political, development and humanitarian resources and action, and pursued with more or less conservative or transformative aims and varying levels of financial and human investment and levels of 'success'. Stabilisation is, in essence, about powerful states seeking to forge, secure or support a particular 'stable' political order, in line with their particular strategic objectives.

Understood in this way, there is perhaps little that is fundamentally new about contemporary stabilisation efforts. What has changed are the specific strategic and tactical objectives being pursued. In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, these are likely to be articulated by Western governments as broadly consistent with liberal peace-building and/or the 'war on terror'. Yet it is nevertheless a particular type of peace and stability and a particular type of state that these powers are seeking through stabilisation. As indicated by the pursuit of 'stabilisation' objectives by governments in countries such as Pakistan, Colombia and Sri Lanka, the concept or label of stabilisation can be readily hitched to domestic counter-insurgency campaigns or civil wars without being tied explicitly to liberal peace-building objectives. These might involve a distinctly different mix of policies and interventions, such as greater reliance on military action and economic development without serious efforts to reach an inclusive political settlement.

Again, the nature and durability of 'stability' achieved through these campaigns will be determined in large part by the means and interests underpinning them – in the east of Sri Lanka, for instance, the government, supported by the emerging powers and some Western donors, has so far sought to consolidate its control and gain 'stability' through economic development and the maintenance of a heavy security presence (Goodhand, Sri Lanka case study).

As witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan, international efforts to secure or support a particular political order through 'stabilisation' may actually encourage conflict in practice, and may not in the end achieve any kind of sustainable political stability. Thus, whether these stabilisation projects might be deemed 'successful' or not depends largely on the metrics and time-frame of success that might be applied, which are far from settled among the key actors involved in most stabilisation contexts. The suppression of an insurgency, the installation of an elected government and the creation of new state institutions, for example, may correspond broadly with the type of political order that the stabilising powers seek to achieve, but that does not mean that the insurgency has been defeated, that the government is legitimate in the eyes of its citizens or that the state institutions will function effectively, all of which would have a crucial bearing on the nature and durability of the 'stability' achieved.

3. Stabilisation in practice: coherent, complementary and coordinated ... or complex, contradictory and competitive?

In order to secure or support a particular political order or dispensation, stabilisation efforts involve the mobilisation of a combination of military, political, development and humanitarian resources and action. The highest-profile international stabilisation operations rely heavily on direct international military and political intervention (e.g. Afghanistan); other stabilisation efforts have involved direct political intervention but weaker international military engagement (e.g. Horn of Africa); and others have focused on diplomatic and development engagement combined with military aid to support nationally-led military campaigns (e.g. US policy in Colombia or Western policies towards Pakistan). To make these combinations work in practice, most Western governments and multilateral institutions are calling for 'integrated', 'comprehensive' or 'whole of government' approaches. This entails the explicit merging of disparate policy spheres in a range of 'hard' and 'soft' stabilisation measures. These integrated approaches demand 'coordinated', 'coherent' and 'complementary' action at both policy and operational levels – the so-called '3-Cs' (Hoyos and Muggah, 2009). The focus has traditionally been on the development, diplomatic and defence spheres – what has become known as the '3-Ds' – but there are also attempts to expand coherence to include other functions, such as humanitarian action, justice, policing, trade and commerce.

Many Western countries, including the US, UK, Canada, Australia, France and Switzerland, have established cross-departmental working groups or units to identify cross-sector priorities, refine and revise policy positions on stabilisation strategies (from arms control and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration to security sector reform and the deployment of peacekeepers) and align domestic priorities with international or regional commitments. In the wake of its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, the US government established the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation (S/CRS). Consolidated in 2005, the S/CRS is expected to promote inter-agency management between the State Department, USAID, country offices and military commanders (Beik, 2007). It combines country-specific teams, integration

planning cells and civilian response capacity.³ In the UK, the SU brings together the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and DFID, and has also developed a deployable civilian response capacity. Canada's Stabilisation and Reconstruction Task Force (START), established in 2005, assembles multiple government departments including the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Department of National Defence and the Department of Justice (START, 2006). Meanwhile, Australia has announced an Australian Civilian Corps to support its humanitarian and development efforts and ensure a smooth transition from one to the other (AusAid, 2010).

On the ground, these changes have led to significantly increased interaction between military/security and civilian entities. In Afghanistan and Iraq, military and civilian actors work together within Provincial Reconstruction Teams to provide relief and reconstruction support. In the Horn of Africa, the US Command for Africa (AFRICOM) has created a Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF-HOA) that provides humanitarian and development assistance in Muslim communities in Kenya (Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010). In 2006, the Colombian government created a Coordination Centre for Integrated Action (CCAI) that seeks to combine military and development interventions in order to support their counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics efforts (Elhawary, Colombia case study).

Despite these important institutional innovations, policy targets are routinely poorly defined and conflicting, usually with little indication of what kinds of stabilisation initiatives might or might not prove effective. As illustrated in Figure 1, stabilisation involves multiple and overlapping arenas of intervention and assistance; whilst these institutional changes have sought to promote greater policy coherence and coordination, the overlaps are often characterised by competing objectives, priorities, timeframes and principles. Stitching together the various actors and institutions and their different

3. See, for example, <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/>.

initiatives and approaches within a common implementation structure is often difficult. In the case of Timor-Leste, for example, Peake and Muggah argue that 'it is hard to see how [the different actors] ... are united by an over-arching concept other than rhetoric'; in light of the relatively small size and population of the territory as compared to the other cases we looked at, an uncomfortable question arises: 'if integration cannot succeed here, can it be done anywhere?' (Timor-Leste case study).

Part of the problem lies in the contradictions between conservative and transformative objectives, and from the sheer breadth and scope of ambition. As Paris and Sisk point out in respect of post-conflict peace-building, 'it is difficult to imagine a more complex and demanding task' (Paris and Sisk, 2008: 1). Indeed, the prescriptions of post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction are arguably 'becoming so complicated that they defy implementation' (Ottaway in Cramer, 2006: 257). Under the heading of 'security' alone, tasks may include small-arms control and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, justice and security sector reform, involving armed forces, police and intelligence services, customs agencies, defence ministries, finance ministries, budget offices, audit offices and the judiciary; political reform, encompassing moves to introduce democratic institutions, new electoral laws and institutions, constitutional change and financing and training civil society organisations; and economic reconstruction and reform, including relief and support to refugees and the displaced, macroeconomic stabilisation and 'an almost endless array of reforms concerning everything from the banking system to commercial codes' (Cramer, 2006: 257–58).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the ambitions of stabilisation appear to have significantly outstripped achievements on the ground in most of the countries in this study. According to Barnett and Zurcher (2008), the uncertainty and unpredictability of post-war stabilisation and state-building is partly attributable to the fact that these missions take place in volatile environments; actions taken in one area have the potential to generate unforeseen results in other areas; and peace-building agencies have only limited knowledge of what is required to succeed. In Timor-Leste, for example, stabilisation has failed to address the causes or drivers of conflict, including persistent political cleavages, ethnic and

community divisions and social and economic inequalities. Despite considerable investment – reportedly as much as \$3.6 billion in assistance between 1999 and 2006 – and after several UN missions and support from more than 14 other agencies, the territory relapsed into crisis in 2006 (Peake and Muggah, Timor Leste case study). In Afghanistan, the creation of an extreme and highly corrupt 'rentier state' fundamentally contradicts the primary stabilisation objective of establishing a sustainable, legitimate and accountable government (Suhrke, 2008). In Pakistan, US financial support to the military may well have further entrenched the military's dominance in Pakistani society and further weakened the civilian government's ability to carry out its functions and responsibilities towards those affected by the conflict (Duplat and Rendon, 2010). In both Afghanistan and Somalia, the international community has sought 'stability' through uncertain and risky political bargains with a variety of local and national actors, many of whom are or have been involved in the very violence and corruption at the heart of the insecurity and crisis stabilisation interventions are apparently seeking to counter (Gordon, Afghanistan case study; and Menkhous, Somalia case study). Thus, in practice, key proponents of stabilisation may not all be pulling in the same direction at the same time.

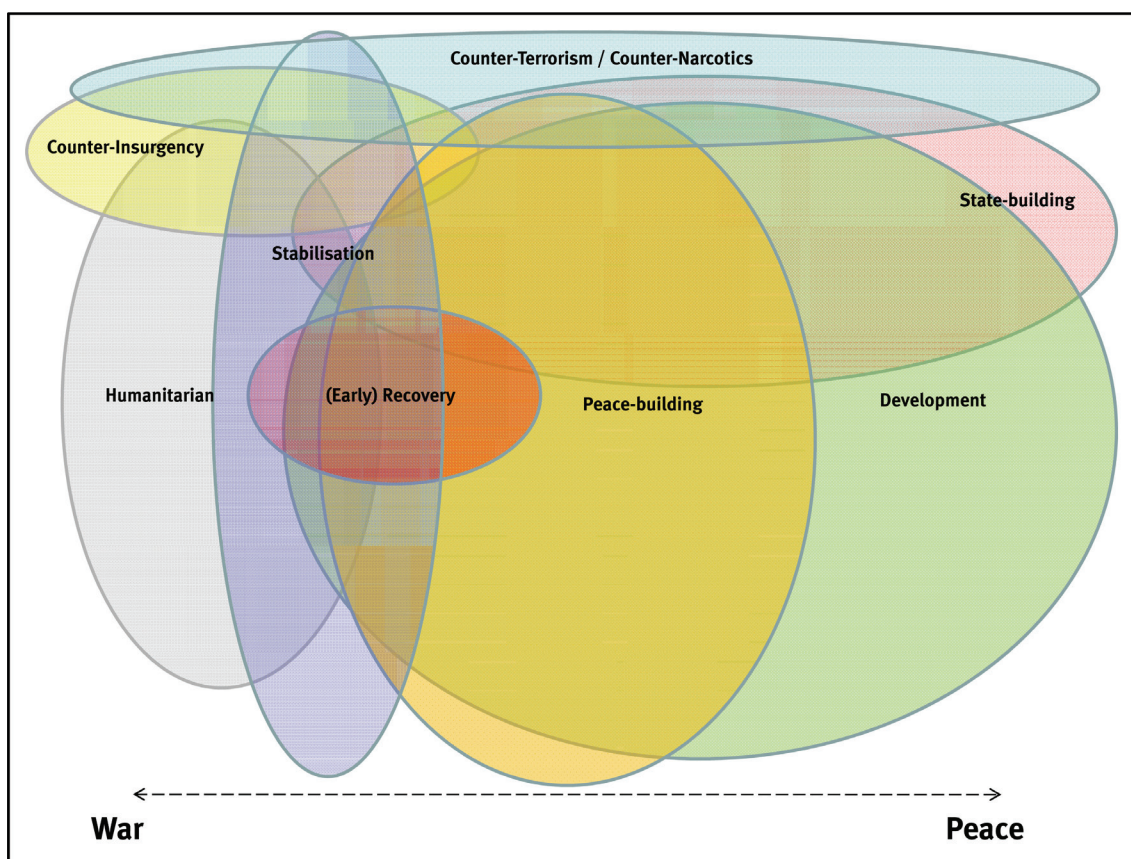
Many interventions in fragile contexts – including stabilisation efforts – are premised on empirically weak and poorly-grounded assumptions. In counter-insurgency contexts, for example, 'quick impact' reconstruction and development projects are regarded as useful tools to build up the legitimacy of intervening forces and to win local support, thereby undermining support for the insurgents. It is expected that these activities serve an important security function that will in turn enhance the space for longer-term development. In Afghanistan, this is reflected in the concentration of development funds in insecure, fragile or so-called un-governed areas that are the focus of stabilisation and counter-insurgency efforts. In 2007, half of USAID's assistance programmes in Afghanistan was spent in four provinces in the south, where there is a high presence of insurgents (Wilder and Gordon, 2009). Yet the relationship between development and security is almost certainly more complex than anticipated by supporters of this approach. In cases where the political settlement is contested, development assistance can have the adverse effect of creating instability by legitimising one party over another (Goodhand and Sedra, 2009).

In Afghanistan, weak governance, high levels of corruption, competition generated by the influx of aid resources and disillusionment with the impacts of aid appear to have heightened public resentment of the government and international forces and may therefore have had minimal or no stabilising effect (Wilder and Gordon, 2009).

Weaknesses in the evidence-base for many stabilisation strategies are compounded by weaknesses in human resourcing, particularly as regards the provision of expert knowledge and analysis of the political, social and economic context in which stability operations are taking place. In Helmand Province in Afghanistan, for

example, Gordon notes that the UK has sought to stimulate political engagement between local residents and their provincial leaders. However, weak gubernatorial leadership between 2006 and 2008, shortages of UK civilian personnel and the rapid six-monthly rotation of both military and civilian elements meant that stabilisation planners lacked a sufficiently detailed knowledge of Helmand's political and tribal forces. For at least the first two years of British involvement, this militated against the development and implementation of a detailed path to stability and an understanding of what support was necessary to legitimise the Helmand authorities.

Figure 1. Overlaps between stabilisation and other policy spheres



4. Humanitarianism and stabilisation: uneasy bedfellows

According to the UK's Stabilisation Unit, the distinctions between stabilisation, humanitarian action and development rest on the explicitly political aims of stabilisation, the neutral aims of humanitarian action and the apolitical, poverty-focused aims of development (SU, 2009). The SU rightly recognises that there may be tensions when humanitarian and stabilisation activities are being carried out simultaneously. However, this is not due simply to a disconnect between the political ambitions of stabilisation and the apparently apolitical or neutral role of humanitarian assistance. Nor is it necessarily due to the difficulties and controversies that surround stabilisation policies *per se*. The uncertainty and contention also emanate from ambiguities within the international humanitarian enterprise itself. These revolve around questions of what principles, priorities and goals should guide humanitarian actors in complex crises, and how humanitarian action should relate to politics – put crudely, is humanitarianism about saving lives, or is it also about saving societies in order to save lives (Barnett and Snyder, 2008)? If it is the latter, do the goals and the means of humanitarian action accord with those of stabilisation? If not, why?

The majority of international humanitarian organisations espouse humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality as fundamental principles that underpin their humanitarian action. This posits an assumed or implicit dichotomy between politics and humanitarianism, with impartiality requiring agencies to deliver relief according to need and without discrimination among recipients; neutrality ensuring that agencies refrain from taking sides; and independence stipulating that agencies are autonomous from any parties involved in the conflict or that have a stake in the outcome. The principles embody the humanitarian ideal of unconditionally alleviating suffering without ulterior motives, and they are seen as a guide to protect humanitarian action from political manipulation (de Torrente, 2004). This separation from politics is difficult to maintain in practice, however, as humanitarian action inevitably shapes and influences the structures and processes that cause vulnerability and suffering: humanitarian action has unavoidable political consequences, irrespective of whether it has political objectives at the outset.

In practice, few humanitarian agencies restrict their activities to immediate and short-term life-saving and relief activities. In fact, the role and importance of humanitarian assistance and broader service delivery in stabilisation discourse can be partly attributed to evolving debates concerning the relationship between relief, service delivery and development (Gordon, Afghanistan case study). During the 1990s, aid actors increasingly advocated for integrating relief and development interventions in protracted conflict-affected crises. This stemmed from the view that relief should not just be seen as palliative but as a means for communities to recover and strengthen their livelihoods (Macrae and Harmer, 2004). This argument did not gain significant traction due to the bifurcated architecture of the aid system, the fact that it did not take into account the changing political economy of protracted crises, the low levels of aid that were flowing to these contexts and the fact that relief was often used by donor governments as a means to avoid more substantial engagement in difficult contexts (*ibid.*).

The policy discourse began to shift significantly in the early 2000s as donors began to focus their attention on fragile contexts and on linking relief more actively with both development and security policy (*ibid.*). At the same time, service delivery in areas such as healthcare, education and water and sanitation were increasingly understood within the development community as critical building-blocks in developing a state's legitimacy (Pavanello and Darcy, 2008). Consequently, improving service delivery systems and outcomes was conceptualised as a means to reduce fragility (OECD/OCDE, 2006) or to support broader transformation, whereby improvements in service delivery in one sector might have positive effects in others. Assistance in service delivery, therefore, is widely understood as serving as a platform for the initiation of long-term development activities (Pavanello and Darcy, 2008).

These debates have encouraged a more broadly defined humanitarianism that seeks to address the causes or reduce the risks of suffering and disaster among vulnerable populations. Indeed, as Barnett and Snyder (2008) observe, there has been a decisive move among many of the largest and most powerful humanitarian organisations towards engagement in comprehensive peace-

building and post-conflict activities. Many agencies have accepted the challenge of attempting to engineer and transform societies, along with the political intentions that this implies (*ibid.*). In the wake of the Rwandan genocide, humanitarian actors have also increasingly advocated for states to take responsibility for protecting civilians during conflict.

What has yet to emerge, however, is a coherent humanitarian paradigm that incorporates political, military and development action to achieve humanitarian objectives. Instead, humanitarian action is still largely defined in terms that exclude or even reject openly political, military, developmental or justice-led responses to humanitarian crises. This, as Barnett and Weiss (2008: 5) suggest, reflects anxiety among many humanitarian actors over what defines humanitarian identity, triggered by global developments including ‘robust’ forms of international military humanitarian intervention which have ‘weakened once reasonably settled distinctions between humanitarianism and other areas of social life’. Consequently, despite areas of potential cooperation, overall the relationship between the humanitarian sector and agencies engaged in international stabilisation efforts tends to be marked by mistrust, suspicion or outright hostility.

Efforts to maximise humanitarian space and the chances of achieving positive humanitarian outcomes will demand strategic engagement with a wide variety of competing actors and institutions involved in stabilisation and development efforts, or whose activities directly impact on humanitarian space. It will require sophisticated political analysis and calculations based on the objectives and aims that each agency is seeking to achieve. This political engagement does not necessarily mean abandoning the core principles of humanitarian action. As Leader suggests, ‘in some, maybe many conflicts the best “political” strategy may well be to assert, as loudly and consistently as possible, that one is totally non-political’ (2000: 47). There is certainly no straightforward positive or negative correlation between, on the one hand, stabilisation policies or operations and, on the other, the protection or maintenance of humanitarian space and the achievement of humanitarian outcomes.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of stabilisation policies for humanitarian agencies, it is crucial to first appreciate the different

meanings and understandings of the concept of humanitarian space. Most importantly, there is the question of whether humanitarian space means primarily the space for humanitarian agencies to operate safely and effectively on the ground, or whether it relates to a wider social, political or geographical space within which human welfare is preserved and promoted – i.e. a space within which people can cope, survive or find protection in the midst of crisis. How humanitarian action and stabilisation interact has implications for each of these two aspects of humanitarian space.

Stabilisation initiatives can impede humanitarian *agency* space, while at the same time having a positive impact on humanitarian outcomes. This occurs, for example, where international military action impedes neutral, impartial and independent relief operations, yet provides vulnerable populations with assistance and some physical protection and security. For example, in Helmand between 2006 and 2009 the UK’s Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) engaged in identifying and managing ‘quick impact’ projects provided military medical assistance (Gordon, Afghanistan case study). Other types of stabilisation interventions may contribute positively to agency space, but not necessarily to humanitarian outcomes. This occurs, for example, where military protection of relief convoys enables humanitarian organisations to deliver material assistance, but fails to protect civilians from wider violence and victimisation (what became known as the problem of ‘the well-fed dead’) (Keen, 2008: 118).⁴

There are also many situations in which both agency space and humanitarian outcomes may be compromised by stabilisation operations. This was the case with the Pakistan military offensive in the North West Frontier Province, during which humanitarian access was severely restricted and vulnerable civilian populations were exposed to significant physical threats (Ali, Pakistan case study). In Somalia, key donor states and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General have, since 2007, sought to channel humanitarian relief through the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), in order to help legitimise it in the eyes of the Somali public. Yet the TFG is viewed by aid agencies as corrupt, incompetent and an active

4. See New York Times (1992) ‘The Well-Fed Dead in Bosnia’ Opinion 15th July 1992. At: <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/15/opinion/the-well-fed-dead-in-bosnia.html?pagewanted=1>

party to the ongoing war and to associated abuses of civilian populations. As Menkhaus observes, ‘to work with and through the TFG in order to deliver humanitarian assistance, in the name of the “greater good” of state-building, would mean acquiescing in the overt politicisation of food aid and accepting the almost certain reality that the aid would never reach those in need’; it would also ‘require surrendering any pretense of neutrality in a war in which the TFG was an active party, which would render the humanitarian aid agencies even more vulnerable to attacks’ (Menkhaus, Somalia case study).

Finally, stabilisation operations may simultaneously protect agency space and humanitarian outcomes, for instance where stabilisation efforts succeed in preventing or reducing violence *and* enable unimpeded access for relief organisations. In Haiti prior to the 2010 earthquake, MINUSTAH and the Haitian National Police were deemed to have improved humanitarian access through ‘security first’ approaches to stabilisation: a major emphasis of stabilisation action in Haiti was on containing or reducing armed violence through so-called ‘community security programmes’, with MINUSTAH undertaking coercive actions in key urban areas, notably Cité Soleil and Bel Air in Port au Prince (Muggah, Haiti case study). While instability remained a major preoccupation in Haiti, the situation appeared to improve after 2007. Stabilisation efforts seemed to generate tentative gains, reducing violence and creating spaces for socio-economic development, albeit contingent on a continued UN military presence. Humanitarian agencies, while initially suspicious, gradually adopted a pragmatic approach, with most recognising that they had lacked any capacity to operate effectively in areas affected by systemic violence between 2003 and 2005 (Muggah, Haiti case study). In Timor-Leste, the deployment of international military and police forces in 1999 and 2006 contributed to rapidly reduced levels of violence, paving the way for the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Peake and Muggah, East Timor case study).

Humanitarian agencies have so far tended to focus on the military aspects of stabilisation. Yet often the most significant opportunities, risks, threats and failures associated with stabilisation are political in nature. Identifying precisely how the security and wider stabilisation agenda is defined by the most powerful actors’ core political and security objectives, how local and national actors

and beneficiaries respond and the extent to which these accord or not with primary humanitarian priorities is key to gauging the implications of stabilisation for humanitarian organisations and the broader humanitarian enterprise. In Somalia, humanitarian and stabilisation interests have been in direct conflict, with so much at stake on both sides that space for compromise and concession has been extremely limited. The transitional government is a party to the civil war, humanitarian actors reject state-building and prioritise neutrality, and humanitarian access is compromised by state-building efforts in a zone of active counter-terrorism operations, which in turn have created political conditions in which radical groups that are hostile to the US and other Western powers make no distinction between aid agencies and international security and intelligence operations. All of these factors contribute to ‘the exceptionally high degree of dysfunctional relations between stabilisation initiatives and humanitarian access’ (Menkhaus, Somalia case study).

A distinct set of challenges and opportunities confront the UN and its specialised agencies in stabilisation contexts. On the one side, the UN is seeking to engage in impartial and independent humanitarian action, while on the other it also seeks to support stabilisation, state-building and peace-building emphasising integrated approaches. As noted by Ali, UN agencies typically ‘play both sides of the field, invoking humanitarian principles in contexts of emergency and post-crisis recovery operations while emphasising the obligatory nature of their responsibility to work with and through the host government elsewhere’. To varying degrees, he notes, ‘all are organised and equipped for both roles, which inevitably intermingle’ (Ali, Pakistan case study). As Jones (2004) observes, the UN bureaucracy has no defined set of ‘national’ interests in a given country, which, for better or worse, makes it more difficult to establish strategic goals in relation to any particular context.

Traditionally, the UN’s only direct political involvement in crisis contexts was to negotiate an end to conflicts and deploy peacekeeping missions to implement peace agreements. However, as the UN has moved towards more direct involvement in peace-building and multi-dimensional peacekeeping, it has had to take on more deliberate and sometimes forceful and partisan forms of political engagement. Still, and despite substantial institutional reform and

innovation designed to improve the organisation's overall role in crisis-affected states, considerable conflict, competition and confusion persist within the organisation, not least in its relationship with political authorities and political processes (Jones, 2004). In both Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for example, the UN has found itself in a severely constricted political space. In Pakistan, sensitivities on the part of the government to any internationalisation of the crisis, the constraints of strict UN security protocols and the organisation's desire to protect the investment it has made in piloting the 'One UN' approach all mean that the UN has, according to Ali, 'been cautious to the point of passivity' in terms of its positioning on the crisis (Ali, Pakistan case study).

In the DRC and Somalia, the UN has openly relinquished any pretence of neutrality or impartiality, even though it lacks the requisite resources and structures to play a comprehensive or clearly strategic stabilisation role, or an effective humanitarian role. It is not clear what it has achieved towards either short- or long-term stabilisation in these contexts. In Somalia, Menkhaus reports how, within the UN, officials in Nairobi and New York went on a public relations campaign in support of the TFG, pledging UN backing to build up the government's capacity and urging donor states to provide rapid support. Security protection for UN compounds across the country was strengthened to meet 'Minimal Operational Security Standards' (MOSS), and the UN Special-Representative and the UN Special Representative on Human Rights pressed

humanitarian aid agencies to continue operations in the country despite extraordinary levels of insecurity.⁵ Yet over the course of 2009 UN and international NGO staff presence declined. By September, the UN had no international staff on the ground anywhere in South Somalia, and most of the 50 or so international UN staff members in the country were concentrated in the relatively secure north. Meanwhile, the 4,000-strong AMISOM force which remained in a few heavily fortified areas of Mogadishu was subjected to serious attacks, including periodic shelling and suicide bombings, prompting retaliatory strikes that often produced significant civilian casualties, fuelling local anger at the continued presence of foreign peacekeepers in the capital⁶ (Menkhaus, Somalia case study). In February 2010, Al-Shabaab, which controls most of the south of the country, announced that it was stopping WFP food operations, accusing the agency of being politically motivated and damaging local farmers.⁷

Beyond specific tensions in particular stabilisation contexts, perhaps the greatest impediment to achieving greater coherence between humanitarianism and stabilisation is growing doubt on the humanitarian side as to the likely success and outcomes or consequences of international stabilisation efforts. As discussed further below, humanitarian actors will remain extremely wary of tying themselves to an apparently faltering policy whose numerous and often undeclared or ill-defined objectives they distrust.

5. 'Somalia: International Community Failing Uprooted Somalis, Says UN Rights Expert,' *All-Africa-com* (21 October 2009) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200910211164.html>

6. 'Statement to the Somali People From Members of the Somalia NGO Consortium' (6 February 2009).

7. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/02/2010228132350935473.html>

5. The humanitarian implications of nationally-led 'stabilisation' campaigns

The tensions and uncertainties associated with stabilisation, and the implications for humanitarian actors, are particularly stark in the context of nationally-led counter-insurgency and 'stabilisation' campaigns pursued in countries with relatively strong but contested states, such as Colombia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. In all three countries, the political and military elite, through various combinations of military, development and political interventions, is seeking to defeat or contain insurgent or 'terrorist' groups in order to consolidate the state's presence and authority and secure a particular domestic political order or form of 'stability' that is favourable to their interests. These offensives have gained international support largely due to concerns that continuing instability in these countries poses a threat to international powers' strategic interests and/or broader international peace and security. Beyond the primary security objectives, these campaigns may be deemed by the governments or elites concerned to benefit peace and development in the longer term, or to be 'protecting' citizens from extremism, violence and crime. For example, the Sri Lankan government has described its pursuit of a military solution to the conflict there as a 'humanitarian rescue operation' (Keen, 2009); similarly, the Colombian government's 'democratic security' policy emphasises its commitment to promote human rights, protect civilians from violence and enhance their livelihoods through relief interventions (Elhawary, Colombia case study).

In Colombia, the government has adopted the current Western model of stabilisation, emphasising the need for a 'comprehensive' or 'whole of government' approach (Elhawary, Colombia case study). As a result, there have been some structural changes within the architecture of government, designed to increase coherence between different departments and institutions. CCAI was set up in 2004, with the aim of developing and implementing an economic, social development and security plan to re-establish long-term governance in insecure areas. The plan is based on a 'clear, hold and build' strategy; military offensives clear and hold areas of guerrilla presence, which creates the space to build state institutions, deliver basic services and attract investment. These efforts have been strongly

backed by the US through Plan Colombia, a multi-billion-dollar aid programme to support counter-insurgency and counter-narcotic efforts, which has been recently revised to include an emphasis on state-building and development.

Despite the liberal or transformational discourse, however, these efforts are more concerned with extending the reach of a political dispensation which favours the interests of ruling classes, than with addressing the deeper causes of conflict and instability. For example, there have been no attempts to reform agrarian policy, which has entrenched land inequalities, denied restitution and compensation rights to uprooted populations and continues to favour the interests of large commercial enterprises (Elhawary, Colombia case study). Overall, security objectives are prioritised over development and humanitarian concerns. As a result, success is often measured by gains against insurgents and narco-traffickers or numbers of demobilised combatants, rather than progress in building sustainable civilian institutions and enhancing respect for human rights and humanitarian outcomes. For example, the government emphasises the fact that 30,000 paramilitaries have demobilised since 2003. Although this has had a considerable impact on levels of violence, many have since remobilised and there has been a failure to offer redress to the victims of their crimes (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it is important to ask who benefits from establishing security; since 2004 there has been a rise in levels of displacement, in large part due to the intensification of military action by the state, crimes committed by remobilised paramilitaries and the implementation of counter-narcotic programmes (*ibid.*). The positive implications for humanitarian action are tenuous as these stabilisation efforts do not seek to reconcile narrow security priorities with a more transformative and sustainable peace-building project.

'Stabilisation' in Sri Lanka and Pakistan differs in terms of both the combination of military, political, development and humanitarian resources and action used and in the objectives pursued. In Pakistan, whilst there is no formal 'comprehensive' approach the government and military, as part of a wider US-led regional

stabilisation effort, there is a ‘clear, hold and build’ strategy in the Swat valley, in which military offensives are followed by humanitarian and development interventions, combined with a considerable security presence and some state-building. Yet these efforts are not homogenous within Pakistan, with the military taking a more ambiguous approach to the militants in the border areas with Afghanistan. This highlights a lack of coherence between US objectives and those of the Pakistan military. Whilst the Pakistan military has sought to defeat the militants where they appear to pose a direct internal threat to the Pakistan state, its stance towards those with regional aspirations has been more accommodating or supportive, despite the show of military opposition, due to its strategic interests in Kashmir and its concern to promote a pro-Pakistan element within the Afghan government (Gregory, 2009). Severing all ties and defeating militant groups operating in Pakistan would undermine its own vision of longer-term ‘stability’ in the region.

The framing of certain national military and state consolidation or ‘stabilisation’ campaigns under the banner of the ‘global war on terror’ has provided implied international legitimacy for what are, in effect, narrow and security-focused national political and military agendas. Western governments are less inclined to prioritise human rights concerns or favour interventionist humanitarian action where this might be seen as challenging to or destabilising of a particular state authority which is seen as an ally in the fight against terrorism and anti-Western extremism – despite the still powerful international rhetoric of a ‘responsibility to protect’ and the spotlight thrown on these contexts by international human rights and justice institutions and processes.

Even where Western donor governments are willing to take steps to seek to ensure respect for IHL and humanitarian space, this is often compromised by an inability to exert diplomatic pressure, in part because of their own controversial actions under the ‘global war on terror’. The Sri Lankan case highlights the primacy of domestic politics and cautions against assumptions of influence and leverage by Western donor governments and other key international actors (Goodhand, Sri Lanka case study). Here, there have been significant tensions between national and international actors with regard to whose version of peace and development should prevail (*ibid.*). Domestic elites have sought to distance themselves politically from international,

particularly Western, actors, in order to limit the potential for nationalist challenges from below. Nationalists have tended to seek internal political cohesion by presenting external actors and their agents (including international humanitarian agencies) as neo-colonial enemies of the state. Yet domestic actors have also learnt to use international interventions for their own political and economic advantage. As stated by Goodhand, ‘domestic elites have been able to play off different donors and international actors with one another, exploiting their diverging interests and positions’ (*ibid.*). At the international level, there is some acceptance that Sri Lanka is in India’s sphere of influence, and hence Western attention is sporadic and inconsistent. Those donors that have sought to put pressure on the government on human rights, democracy and conflict issues have had the least leverage, compared to actors such as Japan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which have been willing to work around the conflict and are more respectful of state sovereignty (*ibid.*).

The lack of leverage (and, in some cases, resolve) among key international donors creates considerable challenges for humanitarian actors. The government’s most recent campaigns to defeat the LTTE and ‘stabilise’ the east and north of the country has had devastating humanitarian consequences, including massive levels of forced displacement, forced returns and, in the north, siege tactics (including restriction of food aid and other relief), direct attacks and mass internment of IDPs.⁸ Despite its reliance on international humanitarian aid to assist civilians affected by the war, the Sri Lankan government has been able to pursue a well-orchestrated and highly effective control strategy and smear campaign against international humanitarian actors, with relatively little cost to itself in terms of overall aid flows. As reported by the European Commission in its May 2008 Global Plan for humanitarian aid for Sri Lanka, this is reflected in ‘a total lack of respect for aid agencies’, with government authorities ‘demanding more taxes, requesting agencies to redirect their aid, rejecting staff visa and programme applications, increasing approval procedures, checks and searches and even expelling agency staff from Sri Lanka’ (European Commission, 2008). During the 2008–2009 military offensive in the north, some aid agencies

8. Muggah, R. (2009b) ‘A country spins out of control’, Toronto Star, accessed at <http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/306145>

cooperated with the government in sending in food convoys, without publicly challenging the conditions under which these convoys were undertaken. Public statements by the lead agencies have also tended to soft-peddle their concerns. But prioritising access and delivery of material relief has come at the cost of protection-focused advocacy. It has also failed to ensure continuing safe and effective access on the ground, and has enabled the government and army to restrict or manipulate international assistance to support their own political and military aims. In the face of the extreme political pressures associated with this kind of nationally-led counter-insurgency and ‘post-victory’ ‘stabilisation’ campaign, there is a risk of international humanitarian actors themselves playing a role in facilitating the progressive erosion of humanitarian space.

The variability, complexity and, at times, apparent incoherence of competing military and political agendas highlights the importance for humanitarian actors looking beyond the rhetoric to understand the nature of particular ‘stabilisation’ campaigns or agendas, both between and within different national contexts. Even where there seems to be a strong commitment to building state institutions and supporting humanitarian and development needs, the means of achieving stability may undermine these in the short term. For example, after the Swat offensive, the Pakistan government had no contingency plan for dealing with the mass displacement and attendant humanitarian needs, partly because it did not want to give militants advance warning that an offensive was imminent (Ali, Pakistan case study). In Baluchistan, where the government faces a nationalist insurgency, humanitarian access has been heavily restricted, despite concern among international humanitarian actors that there are considerable levels of vulnerability. Humanitarian actors have been reluctant to openly challenge the government’s policies and approach, particularly around the

military’s lead role in the response and the potential conflict of interest between simultaneously responding to humanitarian needs and pursuing counter-insurgency objectives. In fact, the government was able to state in the Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan that the ‘successful implementation of this [reconstruction and resettlement] phase would go a long way in winning over hearts and minds as part of the efforts to defeat the scourge of extremism and terrorism’ (PHRP, 2010; ix). The UN has been wary of speaking out for fear of provoking a confrontation with the government that could jeopardise its longer-term development cooperation (Ali, Pakistan case study).

These cases also invite closer scrutiny of the assumptions underpinning agencies’ and donors’ engagement in the wake of government ‘victory’ over insurgents. The Sri Lankan government, for instance, has been concerned to treat the east as a ‘post-conflict’ context and has used this to justify the accelerated resettlement of IDPs and the transition into reconstruction/development. Goodhand reports how, at the request of the government, which insisted that the war was now over, ICRC closed its four eastern offices in July 2009 (Goodhand, Sri Lanka case study). Between \$500 million and \$1 billion has flowed into the east from donors since 2007, despite the fact that the prevailing ‘post-conflict’ environment is highly securitised and far from peaceful; for the US and other key donors, this assistance is intended to help ‘stabilise’ the Eastern Province (ICG, 2009). Donors’ engagement appears to be based on the probably flawed assumptions that state-building and peace-building are necessarily synonymous and mutually reinforcing, and that reconstruction and economic development will necessarily ameliorate long-standing ethnic grievances. Yet the government is in effect seeking to enforce a ‘victor’s peace’, an exercise in ‘*power-building*’ rather than ‘peace-building’, which will have profound influence on the type of ‘peace’ that emerges (Goodhand, Sri Lanka case study).

6. The uncertain future of stabilisation and challenges for humanitarianism

As noted in the introduction, despite all the international attention focused on the US-led stabilisation operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is questionable whether these interventions provide precedents for future operations more generally. The costs (both human and financial), the lack of evident success, dwindling domestic political support and financial and strategic 'overstretch' are likely to dissuade the leading Western powers from undertaking interventions of this kind elsewhere for the foreseeable future. It is possible that in other places, and, indeed, potentially in Afghanistan itself in the years to come, the deployment of Western military force will be refocused on countering immediate perceived security threats, including terrorism, in more limited ways. While the leading Western powers will find it difficult to retreat entirely from coordinated efforts at crisis management and possible military intervention, changes in the global geopolitical landscape and the emergence of new powers such as China, India and Russia imply further uncertainty.

Whether the new generation of UN peacekeeping operations succeeds depends at least in part on resources and support from member states, which have so far been insufficient and uneven. It also depends on the ability of the UN Security Council and Secretariat to develop approaches to the use of force that bridge the gap between traditional peacekeeping and peace enforcement and efforts by regional institutions. Uncertainty and inconsistency in relation to the impartiality of both humanitarian assistance and UN peacekeeping have been aggravated by a lack of funding and capacity. There is risk of failure in eastern DRC, Sudan and elsewhere, coupled with key problems including overstretched military and civilian resources, a lack of political will and an absence of international consensus to support the UN's mandates and objectives in these contexts. The large size, complexity and character of the new missions mean that they require more sophisticated military capabilities, which can often only be supplied by developed states which at present are most notable by their absence in these missions. In contrast to the major international coalition-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, most current UN operations are taking place in unstable situations of lesser

strategic importance to the major Western powers, with fragile ceasefires and peace agreements, periodic or endemic violence and general state weakness or collapse, and are supported predominantly by troop contributions from developing countries (Mayall, 2008). The failure to address these shortfalls is likely to create further tension with the humanitarian components of the UN, which are already uneasy about greater integration.

To the extent that both seek positive change, humanitarianism and stabilisation (at least at its 'softer' end), potentially have much in common. There is also potential for humanitarian action to benefit directly from military and other stabilisation operations in certain contexts at certain times, if these help to maintain or protect humanitarian space and support positive humanitarian outcomes. Yet manifest disquiet within the humanitarian camp remains over the means and possibly the objectives of international stabilisation in contexts such as Afghanistan and Somalia. These concerns are only going to be amplified if stabilisation operations lose their tenuous grip on broad-based peace-building and become more explicitly synonymous with the pursuit of 'hard' security and strategic interests. With state-building and peace-building running into severe problems in Afghanistan, and waning commitment among Western governments to positive and sustainable transformation there and elsewhere, the narrower counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency agenda may be in the ascendant.

Humanitarian agencies are likely to face very different challenges according to the different faces of 'stabilisation' in different political contexts. These include situations where stabilisation is pursued by 'affected states' themselves, whose human rights and humanitarian credentials may be questionable, or by poorly resourced and faltering regional or UN peacekeeping and peace-building missions. Alternatively, these contexts will include situations of acute fragility, such as Somalia, where the establishment of governing authority at any level requires all international actors to assume complex political risks and seek uncertain political bargains with a variety of local, national and

international political actors. There are also, perhaps exceptionally, a minority of improving situations, sometimes at the sub-national level, where the stabilisation task is in concert with progressive indigenous political and economic forces for change and international resources are sufficient to achieve progress towards stability, transition and improved human welfare.

The level and nature of the political and strategic ambition among key international and national actors will prove crucial in all respects, including for humanitarian actors and humanitarian space – for example, whether international powers are aiming for rapid social and political transformation under international military occupation, or ‘backing a decent winner’ (Barnett and Snyder, 2009) in countries with relatively capable and legitimate governments, or otherwise supporting a slower or more conservative trajectory towards an uncertain peace, with varying or patchy regional and international peacekeeping and peace-building support. Location, both geographically and geopolitically, will decisively affect the nature and extent of the most powerful actors’ stabilisation ambitions. The US and its key allies are only likely to pursue stabilisation action in areas where their own interests are most directly at stake, usually in association with a key regional organisation, but are likely to leave it to the UN and regional organisations to handle crisis situations of lesser strategic priority, and to lead in the protracted and inherently difficult business of ‘post-conflict’ recovery and reconstruction (Mayall, 2008).

However well executed and in tune with the humanitarian priorities of aid agencies, experience to date suggests that stabilisation and peace-building efforts are unlikely to prove reliable in delivering tangible positive humanitarian outcomes. Indeed, even where positive social and political change appears possible, there may be heightened potential for further violent conflict, associated with the establishment of new structures, the demise of established institutions and associated interests and the forging of new relations and balances of power. It is perhaps not at all surprising that stabilisation in Afghanistan continues to depend on a substantial combat operation to defeat opposing political forces within the country. Where stabilisation means the consolidation of state power in countries with a capable but contested government, state-building may not equate with peace-building, since consolidation of government power may only serve

to reinforce or exacerbate the causes of the original crisis. In these contexts, as witnessed in Sri Lanka, Colombia and Pakistan, humanitarian agencies will continue to face very tough choices concerning presence and the possibility that their engagement might be serving the interests of the state, rather than humanitarian or liberal peace-building objectives.

Against this highly uncertain political and strategic backdrop, and with a range of new political and military actors expanding their involvement in humanitarian action, many humanitarian agencies may seek to retreat back to the apparent ethical ‘safe zone’ of a conservative humanitarianism. In this way, they can affirm a positive identity in opposition to others who appear to have more dubious humanitarian credentials and questionable motives. This tendency is likely to be particularly pronounced in the face of perceived political and military failure in Afghanistan, Somalia and other key sites of international stabilisation engagement, and will be facilitated by the safeguarding of humanitarian donor funding, which, backed by principles of ‘good humanitarian donorship’, should continue to support humanitarian action that is explicitly neutral and impartial in its intent. The danger, of course, is that by retreating into a ‘principled’ but conservative humanitarianism, humanitarian agencies will face a return to the extreme moral hazards associated with restricting assistance to short-term material relief or *de facto* service delivery in complex environments where people’s basic safety and security is not protected.

Or, indeed, humanitarian agencies may face a forced retreat from these environments entirely due to insecurity and lack of effective access. This is likely to be the case where international or national actors see little utility in allowing humanitarian agencies to operate freely (Hartwell, Iraq case study). Yet independence and neutrality are not always respected in insecure environments, and where there is little opportunity to engage hostile actors in dialogue humanitarian agencies can easily become a target, along with the populations they are trying to help (Stoddard et al., 2009). Either way, humanitarian agencies risk marginalising themselves from the ‘real world’ of politics that lies at the heart of humanitarian crises in these countries, while simultaneously remaining exposed to political manipulation and physical threats from state and non-state actors who will continue to treat them as important elements of their political and military strategies.

Despite the all-pervasive rhetoric of ‘coherence’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘comprehensive approaches’, then, the likely reality is continuing fragmentation and the reassertion of rhetorical boundaries between humanitarianism and other policy spheres, at least in those settings where the going has been particularly tough for the stabilisers, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the DRC and Somalia. Ironically, it is perhaps where the explicit rhetoric of coherence has been weakest that policy agendas may have the greatest chance of cohering in practice, owing simply to a lack of high-level competing and conflicting strategic interests among the key players involved.

Everything hinges on the delivery, or not, of positive change. Sceptical humanitarians will only endorse a comprehensive and transformative peace-building agenda if it really does seem to do what it says on the label. The language of ‘quick

wins’ has so far generated mainly negative reactions among humanitarian actors, exposing deep ambivalence towards the inherent pragmatism of stabilisation. ‘Saving lives’ to ‘save societies’ (Barnett and Snyder, 2008) may be seen as justified if everyone agrees that the society really is being saved: some may see the distortion of neutral, independent and impartial humanitarianism as justified if it is part of a genuine and effective effort to transform societies in ways that are likely to improve human welfare in the future. But recent experience in Afghanistan is likely to fundamentally weaken even the more willing and pragmatic aid agencies’ association with comprehensive stabilisation and peace-building, not least because these agendas have not delivered the kinds of improvements in humanitarian space and humanitarian outcomes that they consider paramount.

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