Monitoring and Evaluation in Stabilisation Interventions

Rationale, challenges and principles of effective monitoring and evaluation

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Effective monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of stabilisation interventions. It is essential to track and evaluate the outcomes of activities, to maximise positive impacts, and to minimise unintended consequences. This is particularly important in stabilisation environments, because they are often complex, unpredictable and characterised by a lack of information, which can lead to plans quickly going off track.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks provide the means to link inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes together when planning and prioritising interventions. This helps planners design cogent and coherent interventions, articulating clearly the underpinning logic of the programme. Moreover, effective monitoring enables real-time evaluation during an intervention, and allows plans to be adapted accordingly. This helps to ensure that stabilisation is achieving the desired impact, and that unintended consequences are minimised. Achieving the desired ends set out in a plan may not be enough in itself: it is also essential to minimise adverse impacts created by the means, particularly where these undermine longer-term goals, and to ensure that "tactical successes" do actually lead to the achievement of strategic goals.

In the longer term, evaluation is also important in supporting accountability and in identifying lessons that can help improve future efforts at strategic, operational and tactical levels.

What are the key challenges that make monitoring and evaluation difficult?

Stabilisation activities present five particular challenges that make monitoring and evaluations difficult:

1. The stabilisation environment is complex and turbulent, making it difficult to establish reliable baselines or to distinguish between strategic shifts in the environment and shorter-term fluctuations.
2. There are often multiple actors (local, national and international) undertaking a range of concurrent activities with different underlying logics over different time horizons. Interventions are often politicised, which creates different pressures in measuring progress and can lead to perceived imperatives to achieve tangible outputs quickly, at the expense of longer-term impacts.
3. The rapidly evolving and sometimes unpredictable nature of stabilisation environments requires regular reframing of the intervention logic, testing of assumptions, and adaptation of intervention activities. Change is often non-linear and hard to measure, which can make it hard to attribute cause and effect.
4. Identifying and collecting suitable indicators of change requires a composite picture that includes both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Indeed, much of the most relevant information – for example, perceptions, relationships and behaviours – is qualitative in nature, can be challenging to measure and requires social/political analysis.
5. Insecurity can make it difficult to ask the right questions to the right people and interpret the answers, and it may even place those collecting data in danger.

Abstract

Monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of stabilisation interventions in order to improve planning, maximise intended impacts and reduce unintended consequences. The stabilisation environment is a challenging context within which to conduct effective evaluation; however, there are a number of practical steps that can be taken to mitigate these challenges.

This policy brief is based on interviews with policymakers and practitioners from a number of nations, conducted by RAND Europe between April and July 2010.

However, while monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation interventions is challenging, there are examples of good practice from which a set of principles can be drawn.

What are the principles of effective monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation environments?

"Theory of change" approaches are widely used for evaluation in complex change programmes, as well as in many of the planning approaches used in stabilisation environments. The experts consulted in this study advocated a monitoring and evaluation framework based on the theory of change approach, but noted the limitations in rapidly changing and unpredictable environments. A more nuanced approach is required that incorporates the following key principles:

- Monitoring and evaluation methods should be based on an explicit theory of change that sets out the overall aims of the stabilisation intervention and explains how proposed activities will contribute to desired outcomes.
- The theory of change can be articulated in "contribution stories" that also set out risks and possible side effects, make explicit the assumptions being made and allow them to be tested throughout the intervention.
- Monitoring and evaluation efforts need to be embedded in stabilisation planning, management and delivery rather than conducted as a discrete or ad hoc activity.

People responsible for monitoring and evaluation should form an integral part of the intervention/programme team.

- Appropriate measures of effect (both quantitative and qualitative) must be identified at the planning stage, and modified as necessary, to enable real-time evaluation of outcomes and impact (or campaign effectiveness assessment, in military terminology).
- Regularly reviewing the validity of theories of change and contribution stories will help build understanding of changes in the stabilisation environment. This will enable adverse impacts (or second and third order effects) to be identified sooner and dealt with more quickly, and inform revision of plans as and when necessary.
- Sufficient resources must be allocated to monitoring and evaluation, though the framework must also be designed to be proportionate to the plan and resources available.
- Imperfect data might still be "good enough" for monitoring and evaluation of stabilisation interventions; expert judgment can play an important role in contextualising and interpreting data.
- To avoid the risk of bias it is desirable to use information from a wide range of sources; it will, however, remain important to prioritise data collection in order to prevent information overload. ■

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