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TECHNICAL REPORT

Monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation interventions

Reviewing the state of the art
and suggesting ways forward

Christian van Stolk • Tom Ling • Anaïs Reding • Matt Bassford

Prepared for the Stabilisation Unit (UK)

The research described in this document was prepared for the Stabilisation Unit (UK).

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Preface

This study was commissioned by the UK's Stabilisation Unit to help develop a better understanding of how effective monitoring and evaluation activities may improve strategic planning and the implementation of stabilisation interventions. Successful implementation requires a regular review of activities to understand what works in what context. The overall objective of this study therefore was to improve the ability of the Stabilisation Unit and its international partners to monitor and evaluate stabilisation interventions.

The Stabilisation Unit was established in 2004 as the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit. It is a joint unit of the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, reflecting the requirement for coherent and complementary stabilisation efforts for the defence, diplomacy and development sectors. The Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit was renamed the Stabilisation Unit in 2007 (Stabilisation Unit 2008) and its mission today is:

- to co-ordinate and support cross-government stabilisation planning and execution;
- to ensure the rapid and integrated delivery of targeted expertise in a cross-government approach;
- to lead on stabilisation lesson-learning and assist with implementation (Stabilisation Unit 2011).

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- In the United Kingdom: Colonel Greville Bibby from the Military Stabilisation Support Group, Ministry of Defence; and Christine Kolbe from Coffey International Limited.
- In the United States: Arthur Collins, Captain Steve Comacho, and Heather Felton from Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities from the Department of Defense; Mike Cooper from the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, Department of State; Graham Kessler from Logos Technologies; and Anne Kovacs from US Crest.
- In Australia: Stefan Knollmeyer, Anneke Outred, and Christina Landsberg from the Afghanistan Country Program and Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation and Recovery Group, Australian Department of Overseas Aid Program.
- At the United Nations: Madalene O'Donnell, Justin Brady, Stephen Crispin, Gillian Cull, Sergiusz Sidorowicz and Elizabeth Kissam from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations; Adrian Morrice from the Department of Political Affairs; and Brian James Williams and Willemijn van Levyveld from the Peacebuilding Support Office.
- At the European Union: Maureen Brown from the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability.
- At the World Bank: Roy Gilbert from the Independent Evaluation Group.

All interviews are anonymised in the report.

Finally, the research team would also like to thank Dr. Stuart Johnson and Hans Pung, colleagues from RAND, who reviewed earlier drafts of this report and helped to improve it. The views expressed in this report represent those of the authors only.

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Summary

The UK Stabilisation Unit (SU) commissioned RAND Europe to assist in improving monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of stabilisation interventions. This assignment has two phases. The aim of phase 1 is to draft a think piece on what is considered current practice in M&E frameworks in stabilisation interventions and identify a number of steps that could be taken forwards to improve the M&E of stabilisation interventions. The aim of the subsequent phase, phase 2, is to develop guidance to assist strategic planners, in conjunction with the Stabilisation Unit. This report describes the conclusions of phase 1.

Stabilisation entails an integrated approach to dealing with a range of complex problems and needs that arise from unstable and violent environments. Stabilisation is essentially the process or collection of activities which are aimed at reducing the risk of normal political processes becoming violent. To achieve this, two outcomes are required:

- a change in the perceptions of individuals and groups (e.g. regarding views on corruption and approval ratings of government);
- a change in behaviour towards non-violent conflict resolution, in a sustained and consistent manner.

M&E is central to learning lessons in stabilisation interventions. Its frameworks, in general, are important in producing explicit accounts of how the proposed activities would lead to the desired outcome. M&E tells us whether the right things are being done, and overall whether they are having the impact expected and desired. When it is done well M&E helps to draw out lessons for the future.

There is a great demand for M&E in stabilisation. However, it is clear that applying conventional M&E frameworks is problematic in stabilisation interventions. This is mainly because of how stabilisation interventions are structured and of what they aim to address. We note four main challenges:

- the particular way in which stabilisation interventions tend to unfold, with a wide range of often concurrent activities that have different underlying logics;
- related to the first, the different time horizons and pressures for measuring progress that apply to the actors and activities in a given stabilisation intervention;
- the limited capacities (e.g. organisational culture and technical skills) of actors involved in stabilisation for undertaking M&E activities, owing to time pressure and the lack of training in M&E;

- the complexity of the environment in which stabilisation takes place – what you are trying to measure is often intangible, which has an impact on M&E processes such as data collection and the interpretation of data.

Therefore an approach to M&E needs to be tailored carefully to the stabilisation context.

In terms of current practice, there is broad agreement in the stabilisation, peace support and development community that theory of change (ToC) frameworks are a good basis for M&E. They inform the design of the M&E framework by providing a systematic way to think about the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts of a stabilisation intervention. Using ToC frameworks early on may enable several of the challenges to the effective use of M&E in stabilisation to be addressed. In addition, the frameworks link objectives clearly to activities by considering the logic of intervention. This makes it easier to prioritise data gathering and to evaluate whether activities are contributing to the outcomes envisioned.

However, few organisations have applied them. In order to make a ToC approach practical and relevant, we need to overcome a number of challenges. Some of these arise from the ToC framework itself, while others are associated with the stabilisation context. These include:

- attributing outcomes and managing unintended outcomes;
- capturing feedback loops;
- considering what is good enough evidence;
- prioritising indicators on outcomes.

Therefore, for ToC to be fully relevant and appropriate for the stabilisation context, the framework needs to be adapted or tailored. This is achievable, and we propose a number of ways to strengthen the ToC framework that should help inform the M&E debate in stabilisation. They include the use of the following:

- Contribution stories based on ToC to create well-developed narratives that facilitate easier consideration of unintended outcomes and better attribution of outcomes.
- Real-time and embedded evaluation (as opposed to ad-hoc after-action reviews) to review the ToC regularly and capture feedback loops.
- Criteria to guide evaluators' judgement of evidence and prioritisation of performance metrics.

CHAPTER 1 **Monitoring and evaluation is central to learning lessons in stabilisation interventions**

1.1 **The study aims to improve strategic planning in stabilisation by strengthening monitoring and evaluation**

The objective of this assignment is to improve the international community's ability to monitor and evaluate stabilisation efforts. The report outlines a conceptual theory of change (ToC) framework to guide M&E efforts in the stabilisation context and suggests how this might be applied to the stabilisation environment. The suggestions are not aimed solely at supporting bilateral stabilisation interventions. Rather, they have been intentionally designed to fit within, and be useful to, broader multilateral stabilisation interventions.

This think piece is not an end in itself. While we outline the key characteristics of effective M&E in the stabilisation context, the agenda that is presented is designed to facilitate discussion rather than to define specific improvement activities. The aim of our work subsequent to this report will be to develop guidance on the implementation of M&E in stabilisation interventions for potential use by the SU and its key stakeholders and partners.

The report reflects on what stabilisation is and the outcomes that a stabilisation intervention tries to achieve. This discussion seems of value, given the divergent views of what a stabilisation intervention may entail. Then, in this chapter, we make the case for the importance of M&E in stabilisation. Subsequent chapters develop the M&E approach. Chapter 2 sets the landscape of the M&E of stabilisation interventions and associated challenges. Chapter 3 introduces a ToC framework to guide evaluation approaches. It discusses what needs to be considered when applying such approaches to stabilisation contexts. Finally, Chapter 4 outlines how the ToC approach may be tailored to suit stabilisation interventions. There are also three annexes: the first provides examples of theories of change, the second describes the OECD-DAC's approach to monitoring and evaluation, and the third details the research methodology.

In writing this report we drew upon a documentary review and 15 interviews with individuals involved in stabilisation efforts. These included the military, national government stabilisation entities, development agencies and international organisations.

1.2 **Stabilisation aims to reduce the risk of a normal political process becoming violent**

[Stabilisation is] a space rather than a plan

First of all we did not have a plan; we had a broad spectrum of possible courses of action

Each situation is different – either requiring a rapid intervention or slower consensus building

Participants' feedback at an MNE 6¹ workshop in Shrivenham, 18 June 2010.

Stabilisation entails making an integrated approach to dealing with a range of complex problems and needs that arise from unstable and violent environments. It is essentially the process or collection of activities that are aimed at reducing the risk of normal political processes becoming violent. This risk reduction results from changes in the beliefs, perceptions, behaviours of and relationships between individuals and groups. It entails changes in the incentives that stimulate violent versus non-violent behaviours.

Stabilisation aims to discourage groups from resorting to violent means in order to compete for power – or in order to control people, land or natural resources – by encouraging them to resort to non-violent means of competition and conflict resolution. The process focuses on the establishment of political and security stability. At its heart lies a strong political focus, as opposed to humanitarian assistance. It incorporates the capacities of a wide range of government partners – civilian and military, national and international – working together with the aim of collaboration (Slotin *et al.* 2010). The UK concept of stabilisation has emerged in response to needs on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is becoming increasingly clear that the concept and approach may be applied to a broad range of complex conflict environments, including ones in which multilateral partners dominate.

Stabilisation as a concept overlaps and interacts with a wide range of activities and objectives in the political, humanitarian, military and development fields. It may be a necessary condition for other activities to take place or be successful. It is also true that activities in other fields may affect the success of stabilisation efforts. Stabilisation contributes to peace building and state building through the prevention or reduction of

¹ The United States Joint Forces Command website explains that “MNE 6 represents the latest in the MNE series of experiments hosted by USJFCOM. The experiment series began in November 2001 as a venue to develop better methods to plan and conduct coalition operations. Since then, the MNE community developed structures, processes and tools to make future multinational engagements in crisis interventions more effective and efficient. MNE 6 is a two-year effort involving 16 nations [including the UK] and NATO's Allied Transformation Command (ACT). The goal is to improve coalition capabilities using a whole of government approach to counter actions of irregular adversaries and other non-state actors.”(USJFCOM 2009)

conflict and the creation of sufficient security to kick-start a political or peace process and by beginning to make progress on the underlying causes of conflict. It complements early recovery efforts in crisis environments by focusing on post-conflict zones and the re-establishment of political and security stability within them. Stabilisation complements counter-insurgency operations by addressing the grievances of insurgents. The relationship between stabilisation and humanitarian assistance may be tense; humanitarian assistance is impartial, while stabilisation is part of a political intervention and position. However, the two may be complementary. Stabilisation activities may help humanitarian assistance to reach insecure areas while humanitarian assistance may strengthen efforts directed at stabilisation.

A stabilisation intervention may consist of a wide range of activities undertaken by various actors and partners. They may operate in partnership or in silos, and may use different intervention logics that contribute to the overall goal of improving political stability and security. Stabilisation activities, once begun, may need to be sustained simultaneously over years rather than months in order to consolidate an impact and engage actors at different points in time (SU 2008).

1.3 **Stabilisation outcomes focus on changes in beliefs and behaviour**

Stabilisation interventions focus on a range of outcomes relating to the beliefs and behaviours of groups and individuals. Those setting objectives for stabilisation interventions increasingly look at efforts such as those in the following examples:

- building a school: whether they produce measurable and sustained changes in beliefs and perceptions such as reduction in perceptions of corruption, exclusion or impunity, especially on the part of politically relevant individuals and groups;
- changes in the incentive structure: whether they are producing measurable and consistent changes in behaviour and relationships, such as the resolution of more disputes without recourse to violence, a broader base of enthusiastic participants in a peace process, and so on.

These outcome measures provide a solid basis for framing M&E activities and thinking about how outcomes may be measured.

1.4 **Monitoring and evaluation is central to understanding what works and what needs to be improved in stabilisation interventions**

M&E is important in giving those involved in managing programmes the right information to enable them to manage and to adjust strategies and to draw lessons for the future. It may involve reflecting on whether programmes are ‘doing the right things’ and provide answers about whether programmes are ‘doing things right’ (Rynn and Hiscock 2009) by looking respectively at intended and unintended outcomes. It is particularly important for those implementing policy initiatives and change programmes to ensure that the strategic objectives and outcomes of the interventions are achieved.

M&E is critical to stabilisation in relation to creating a means of learning from successes and mistakes and adapting programmes as they unfold, to ensure that the chances of achieving success and minimising harm are maximised. There needs to be recognition in the wider policy community that mistakes will be made in stabilisation interventions. The key objective of M&E is to ensure that lessons are learnt from those mistakes. So, to be effective M&E should provide vital information and insights upon which actions can be based – for instance, to assist in strategic planning, improve stabilisation efforts and draw lessons for the future. The move towards the development of M&E frameworks looking at stabilisation is also closely linked to the development of results-based management, ensuring that interventions deliver outcomes (see e.g. Cox and Thornton 2010). In this context M&E is an ongoing activity that forms part of the overall approach, rather than a one-off snapshot or diagnosis of success or failure after the fact.

CHAPTER 2 **Monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation interventions needs to move beyond conventional approaches**

2.1 **Conventional monitoring and evaluation approaches are difficult to apply in stabilisation interventions**

There is great demand for M&E of stabilisation interventions as those involved seek to understand what works in what context. However, M&E of stabilisation interventions is often described as ‘being in its infancy’, ‘developing’ and at present consisting of a ‘blank piece of paper’. It is clear that applying conventional models of M&E (see, for instance, the OECD-DAC’s model in Annex 2) or ideal M&E types to stabilisation interventions is proving difficult because of the challenges that characterise these contexts. The speed of response is one such challenge. In addition, stabilisation environments tend to be fragile and complex. This means that inputs and processes often do not lead to the outcomes expected. A more flexible and adaptive approach to M&E is called for: one that is responsive to these challenges and captures unintended consequences as well as interdependencies between different strands of an intervention. Developing such an approach requires a detailed understanding of the challenges at hand and also of the discussions that are taking place around the globe to improve the M&E of stabilisation interventions.

2.2 **A number of challenges to the effective use of monitoring and evaluation of stabilisation interventions exist**

It is clear that applying M&E frameworks to stabilisation interventions is problematic. Difficulties reside in how stabilisation interventions are structured and in the substance of what stabilisation interventions try to address. Our work points to the following four main characteristics of stabilisation interventions that cause problems for M&E (see e.g. Cox and Thornton 2010, de Coning and Romita 2009, Scheye and Chigas 2009, Coffey International 2009, Rynn and Hiscock 2009):

- the particular way in which stabilisation interventions tend to unfold, with a wide range of often concurrent activities that have different underlying logics;

- related to the first, the different time horizons and pressures for measuring progress that apply to the actors and activities in a given stabilisation intervention;
- the limited capacities (e.g. organisational culture and technical capacities) of actors involved in stabilisation to undertake M&E activities, owing to time pressure and the lack of training in M&E;
- the complexity of the environment in which stabilisation takes place, where what you are trying to measure is often intangible, which in turn has an impact on M&E processes such as data collection and the interpretation of data.

The first three observations reflect on how stabilisation interventions are structured and resourced, while the last reflects on the substance of a stabilisation intervention. These observations are considered below in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.4.

2.2.1 **Monitoring and evaluation needs to reflect how stabilisation interventions unfold – but there are different ways to structure interventions**

Among the main challenges for M&E in stabilisation interventions are to structure the activities involved in a coherent way, to articulate common goals, and to allow the relative contributions of each strand of activity to those goals to be understood. This is particularly problematical because there are often a range of activities involved, with elements of conflict prevention, peace building, state building and institution building operating over different timeframes (see e.g. DfID 2009, International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding 2010, Jones and Rathmell 2005b). There is no right way to structure an intervention; examples include programmatic approaches, integrated planning, and building a portfolio of relevant activities. Different ways of structuring an intervention will be needed depending on the context, type of intervention and range of organisations involved. We identified three main approaches to planning and managing the possible range of activities, each with particular implications for M&E design.

Having to act quickly. The practical reality of stabilisation is that component activities are often introduced quickly and with limited planning in response to a crisis situation. It is therefore in the nature of stabilisation interventions that you begin with a group of broad and at times disparate activities. This type of intervention relies less on the internal logic and complementarity of activities and more on the judgement of individuals in different agencies in identifying the best activities within their political and agency constraints and undertaking these in a timely fashion. The challenge of M&E is to make sense of the activities once they have been initiated, to make judgements on their interdependency and complementarity as they unfold, and to enable learning and adaptation in order to increase coherence.

Transferring models and experience. This approach focuses on using a suite of activities in stabilisation that has proved successful in various parts of the world. These include, for instance, the transposition of military tactics used in Iraq to Afghanistan. The approach has similarities to the one considered above, but starts with assumptions about what works and what does not in a given context. It therefore relies less on ad-hoc agency judgement, and calls for some in-built knowledge of interdependencies and complementarity. However, this approach may be based on faulty assumptions as particular models are sometimes less easily transferable to different contexts than initially thought. M&E may

play a role in helping organisations to identify how the models and lessons from other experiences need to be adapted and changed to fit the local context.

Selecting projects/programmes. This approach attempts to structure a balanced set of stabilisation activities. Projects and programmes are individually selected. It is appealing from an M&E point of view because the structured process of inclusion should make the M&E framework explicit up front, meaning that the goals will be aligned to activities up front. This is the approach increasingly used by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) in administering the Peacebuilding Fund, and it then influences post-completion reviews of the programme. The approach has some similarities with those of other donor-funding mechanisms. The main problem with this approach is that it does not ensure a comprehensive set of programmes and activities, and it may not be able to adapt to quickly changing circumstances. In its most extreme application (active portfolio management), the approach may implicitly assume that certain activities will fail and take this as a given, a position which it may be difficult to maintain for political and value-for-money reasons.

Developing an M&E framework will be useful in all the three approaches. However, M&E will have different roles in each. In the first, M&E is less likely to have been considered up front due to the speed of the intervention and other related factors. In this situation, M&E can be used during the intervention as a tool for increasing complementarity and coherence across different agencies and helping organisations to ensure that they are contributing to overall objectives. The main challenge for those involved in evaluating and reviewing programmes is to build in reviews that will allow ToCs to be made explicit and baseline assessments to take place. In the last two approaches, M&E frameworks tend to be more embedded at the outset of the interventions and therefore the ToC would be more explicit and could be reviewed accordingly. Nonetheless, all three approaches would call for real-time reviews, thinking through the theories of change of individual programme components and how they link to strategic plans, and designing appropriate metrics to measure outputs, outcome and impacts.

2.2.2 **Monitoring and evaluation needs to be relevant across different time horizons – but there is a tendency to prioritise short-term indicators**

Some of the tension in stabilisation has tended to arise because of the different time horizons used by actors engaged in stabilisation. Some look more explicitly at the short term, while others have longer outlooks for achieving results.² This is compounded by the fact that conflict and stabilisation are not linear processes, so sequencing and staging of activities over time is difficult (see e.g. Jones and Rathmell 2005a). Furthermore, political pressure requires that the stabilisation community shows progress in the short to medium term, thus putting pressure on M&E frameworks to show progress and prioritise short-

² It also has implications at the actor level. For instance, the UN places a lot of emphasis on conflict prevention and peace building, particularly in addressing the root causes of conflict and violence. The OECD-DAC guidance focuses in particular on strengthening the relationship between state and society, the United States emphasise security cooperation, and Australia and Canada stress peace keeping. Each implies slightly different geographical and time horizons.

term indicators. The response of M&E frameworks under such pressure is often to focus on outputs rather than on outcomes and impacts.

2.2.3 Monitoring and evaluation requires organisational resources and capacity – including leadership and cultural commitment

One of the more difficult challenges is how to embed M&E frameworks in stabilisation interventions when organisations have limited capacity to manage and use them or when they resist their use. This may also relate to the limited capacity of those involved in M&E in stabilisation environments to make sense of the data that are collected. That reflects the limited time available to undertake M&E activities, as well as the capacity to collect the ‘right’ data and make sense of them. An example is a programme on police training in which outcomes were relatively straightforward to measure, but attributing responsibility for delivering those outcomes had proved difficult in terms of getting buy-in from organisational leadership and building an environment in which learning could take place. We identified three ways to tackle this problem:

- by focusing on training of staff and building capacities – for instance in data collection, M&E and reporting;
- by building on existing capacities, within the organisation and more widely, which can be used for M&E;
- by encouraging learning across the different agencies involved in stabilisation.

An example of the first of these is current work that the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team and Department for International Development (DfID) Afghanistan are conducting to support the M&E of stabilisation plans and programmes. It appears that bottom-up processes endorsed by senior decision-makers may also empower staff on the ground and make them take ownership of M&E. Another approach has been used in the United States, to develop interagency learning lessons fora as well as databases that cut across the main silos in which policy-makers can engage.

2.2.4 Monitoring and evaluation frameworks need clarity on what to measure – but it is not clear what are the right data or ‘good enough’ evidence in a complex and fragile environment

The substance of stabilisation is crucial in understanding why conventional M&E models are difficult to apply in this environment. Stabilisation activities are often fluid and subject to change over time. Moreover, the outcomes associated with stabilisation interventions – such as political and social change, community perceptions, conflict dynamics, and so on – are difficult to measure. This has two important consequences for M&E frameworks.

Firstly, it is not clear what data should be collected. The consequence has been that substantial efforts have been made to collect data, while less effort has been made to analyse these data. For instance, of the 5–8 per cent of resources spent on collecting and analysing data in some US stabilisation interventions, on balance significantly less is spent on analysing the data and drawing the lessons for stabilisation operations than on data collection. It is not always clear that the right data are being collected and where the right data may be collected; and it is not clear that proper use is made of the data as an input into M&E activities. There appears to be a need for clever metrics that increase

understanding rather than risk 'data being collected for the sake of it' (see Agoglia *et al.* 2010).

Secondly, M&E frameworks in stabilisation interventions are increasingly relying on qualitative measures and perceptions data to capture outcomes. However, the question that remains is how to establish baselines and make sense of longer-term trends using such data in a complex and changing environment. This requires judgement on and understanding of what can be considered 'good enough' data and evidence. This judgement is especially important given some of the difficulties in gathering reliable data in insecure and dangerous areas.

3.1 There are key principles that underpin effective evaluation

As identified earlier, significant resources are put into data collection for monitoring purposes but often a framework to organise and make sense of the metrics is lacking.³ We suggest that delivering this would be best supported by ensuring, as far as possible, that evaluations have the following features (Greenhalgh *et al.* 2004):

1. *Attention to processes* – focusing on programme outcomes as well as, in equal measure, attention to processes. This contrasts with more classical evaluation approaches, which tend to look at outcomes first and then to look for evidence to support attribution.
2. *Carefully descriptive* – providing enough contextual detail to allow judgements to be made and to determine which lessons are most likely to be transferrable.
3. *Adopt common indicators and measures* – developing agreed definitions of concepts and prioritising measurements over time (this would logically tend to follow the first two steps).
4. *Multidisciplinary and multimethod* – the evidence used to support or undercut hypothesised connections between actions and outcomes is likely to be generated by a variety of disciplines and approaches.
5. *Participatory* – to ensure that views are adequately and fairly represented, and that evaluations are useful to stakeholders.

The last two of these are particularly relevant when thinking of ways to measure changes in perceptions and behaviour in stabilisation environments. Observations from staff in the field might be corroborated by polling information and focus groups as well as by analysis of secondary data on, for example, economic activity. Evaluations and reviews therefore not only seek to include views but also to make the information

³ See the extensive set of potential data points presented in Agoglia *et al.* (2010).

useful for those who participate in activities subject to review or in the M&E process itself.

3.2 Theory of change provides a framework to guide the evaluation approach

There is wide support for using a ToC to underpin M&E. However, there is less understanding of how this should be managed practically.

In applying the ToC we use as a starting point the argument of Weiss (1995):

Grounding evaluation in theories of change takes for granted that social programmes are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why the programme will work ... The evaluation should surface those theories and lay them out in as fine detail as possible, identifying all the assumptions and sub-assumptions built into the programme. The evaluators then construct methods for data collection and analysis to track the unfolding assumptions. The aim is to examine the extent to which programme theories hold ... the evaluation should show which of the assumptions underlying the programme are best supported by the evidence.

ToC provides a conceptual framework that can guide an evaluation approach, rather than constituting a methodology in itself. Its benefit is that it requires a focused discussion on the overall aims of stabilisation and, preferably at the very start, an explicit account of how the proposed activities would lead to the desired outcome (see Figure 3.1). In this approach, aims are identified, as are the inputs, processes and outputs required to achieve the aims. For each of these stages we need to understand the ‘why, what, who, when, and how’. For instance, if police training is to achieve improvements in standards of behaviour and hence increase local acceptance and legitimacy – in turn contributing to greater stability – we need to know why this is expected, what will be done, who will do it, when it will be done and how.

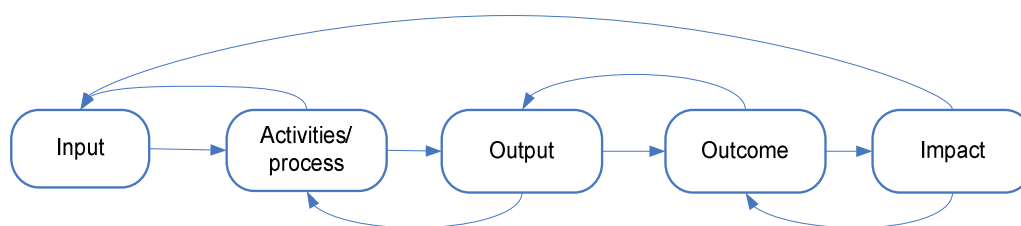


Figure 3.1: Outline of a basic logic model

SOURCE: RAND Europe, 2010.

Practically, the ToC approach places four requirements on those involved in M&E. Individually these steps are neither controversial nor radical, and taken together they provide a firm and pragmatic base for evaluations and reviews:

1. A focus on programme outcomes, but requiring that equal *attention is paid to processes*. This contrasts with more classical evaluation approaches, which tend to look at outcomes first and then for evidence to support attribution.
2. An ability to reconstruct and represent the sequence of events *connecting actions to each other in order to understand causal chains and pathways*. This also requires an appreciation of how these actions were intended to contribute to the identified outcomes, preferably identifying causal mechanisms.
3. Sensitivity to the possibility that, during the life of a programme or intervention, widely held initial theories of change may evolve in response to *learning* or to external events. The evaluation should capture these changing understandings and resulting actions.
4. Sensitivity to the fact that *different and potentially conflicting theories of change* (both explicit and implicit) may be simultaneously pursued – that different stakeholders may have alternate theories in mind.

3.3 **Applying the theory of change early in an intervention has some advantages**

There is agreement that ToC frameworks need to be introduced early when designing interventions. This has the advantage of informing the design of the M&E framework by providing a systematic way to think about the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of a stabilisation intervention. This makes it easier to prioritise data gathering and to evaluate whether activities are contributing to the outcomes envisioned.

There are a number of associated advantages as well:

- It allows for the ToC to be clarified and tested throughout the stabilisation intervention and for lessons to be learnt and stabilisation activities to be adjusted and improved.
- Baseline assessments are possible once the ToC has been made clear. These should include identifying key sources of conflict and violence, the key groups involved, and the narratives that explain which factors the activities aim to influence and which impacts are expected (Cox and Thornton 2010).
- The contribution of individual programme components to an overall strategic plan would be clearer. These assessments need to be integrated into planning cycles, and not form one-off exercises – as is currently often the case (Slotin *et al.* 2010)

3.4 **There is consensus that theory of change frameworks are relevant in stabilisation – but they need to be adapted to specific contexts while using best practice in evaluation**

There exists a broad consensus that ToC frameworks are relevant and useful in stabilisation. Although their use is well documented in the literature (see e.g. OECD-DAC 2009, Cox and Thornton 2010), few cases in which ToC approaches were systematically applied were identified in the present study. This observation possibly reflects the difficulties of applying conventional ToC models to stabilisation and also the need to tailor ToC approaches to take into account the challenges described earlier. These challenges do not mean that it is impossible to collect evaluative data and to form evidence-based judgements. Understanding what was intended, what happened, what was learned and what should be done differently are minimum requirements of an evaluation, however complex the evaluation process may be. Our approach tries to move beyond conventional models of M&E by recognising the complexity and the challenges of the stabilisation context. It seeks to arrive at a pragmatic M&E approach that can be adapted to a range of circumstances, reflect on available capacities, and make the best use of the data available. To do this, we need to reflect on what the ToC approach can offer M&E activities and also which limitations of the approach and which challenges associated with its use in the stabilisation context need to be addressed.

3.5 **The limitations of theory of change frameworks need to be considered and addressed when applied to the stabilisation context**

There are two notable drawbacks of using ToC approaches:

- The frameworks may be perceived as abstract. If not reviewed regularly, they may become linear and fail to pay enough attention to unintended outcomes. Attribution of outcomes and managing unintended outcomes are key aspects of M&E in stabilisation. It is likely that changes in stabilisation such as ‘improved perceptions of security’ are the product of a complex array of factors, of which international interventions may play but one part. Attributing causality is problematic, though it should not prevent effective monitoring from taking place.
- The frameworks have typically been used in a programme – or programme component – rather than as strategies, and therefore they often ignore interdependencies and feedback loops. Capturing relevant feedback loops is problematic in complex and dynamic environments (Coffey International Development 2009). However, we know that this is important in adjusting stabilisation interventions over time and learning lessons as interventions unfold. Capturing feedback loops is also important as strategic planning assumptions are often proved wrong.

The unique environment of stabilisation interventions adds a number of challenges, which need to be addressed when applying a ToC approach:

- Considering what is good enough evidence relates to the need to make judgements on the basis of evidence and what the data say and cannot say.

- Prioritising data capture and metrics is important. This point is related to the previous point, but focuses on using capacity and solid criteria in stabilisation interventions in order to select a set of metrics that enables those monitoring and evaluating to make sense of the range of data available, taking into account the reliability of those data.

CHAPTER 4 **Theory of change approaches need to be tailored carefully to the stabilisation context**

4.1 **The theory of change approach needs to be tailored for stabilisation**

It is apparent that the ToC approach needs to be adapted or tailored to take into account the challenges associated with stabilisation interventions. Our judgement is that this is worthwhile and achievable. This chapter outlines how this might be achieved and informs the M&E debate in stabilisation by looking at four main steps:

- development of contribution stories;
- use of real-time revaluation;
- identifying evidence that is good enough;
- prioritising performance metrics.

We use the terms ‘evaluation’ and ‘review’ interchangeably and recognise that most M&E activity in stabilisation environments is likely to involve monitoring and review. Our emphasis here is on real-time review or on reviews conducted prior to implementation rather than on post-completion evaluations.

4.2 **The use of contribution stories helps the attribution of outcomes and the management of unintended outcomes**

Contribution stories provide insight into why practitioners and policy-makers believe that their use of resources (money, authority, expertise, time, etc.) will contribute to intended outcomes, and what side-effects and unintended outcomes they envisage (Mayne 2008). By reflecting on the side-effects and unintended outcomes, they may be differentiated from typical ToC approaches. They provide a way of embedding a ToC approach in an evaluation by ensuring that the ToC is informed and shaped by the stories of those who are in a position to provide rich, contextualised narratives that explain their understanding of the causal pathways connecting their activities to the aims of stabilisation. Contribution stories can be used to identify what evidence you need to evaluate how well a programme

has met its stated goals, as well as highlighting where gaps exist between different types of expectation and the reality of what a programme has delivered.

We outline here the tenets of the contribution analysis, which we aim to apply to the stabilisation context:⁴

1. **Building a contribution story.** Firstly, in order to understand the contribution story it is necessary to identify the formally stated objectives, activities and expectations of those involved in stabilisation interventions and those affected by the interventions. These should be contextualised and developed by exploring the tacit assumptions held by a range of stakeholders and partners, focusing on what their intended outcomes were, and what led them to expect (or not) that their planned and current activities would result in those future outcomes. These stories may be fruitfully explored (e.g. through interviews, surveys or focus groups) at different levels of impact. The stories are typically developed at the outset of a project. However, they may also be used for reviews or evaluations of interventions. They mostly help develop the intervention logic or test the initial ToC assumptions held at the outset of the intervention.
2. **Comparing and contrasting contribution stories.** It is also critical to identify where differing contribution stories exist within and between organisations. Themes should be identified (e.g. Do certain organisations or types of person have shared understandings of these contributions stories?)
3. **Testing contribution stories.** Once the perceived and expected contribution stories have been identified, it is important that they are tested with others through workshops or other means, possibly asking respondents to score them for how compelling they were. Apparent leaps of faith could be explored and assumptions challenged.
4. **Preparing for the unexpected.** When drafting contribution stories for stabilisation interventions, it is useful to incorporate future planning. There are situations that may be defined as breaking points. These have been described to us as a dry woodpile that one match (e.g. an election, a civilian casualty) could ignite. The trend data, in this case, may tell only a part of the story and may fail to distinguish between a situation that is poor but manageable and a situation that is on the verge of breakdown. Any contribution story therefore requires some further contextualising and it is likely that this will involve expert judgement on how likely or how certain events are (e.g. using expert consultations or the development of scenarios to understand the likely futures that could occur).
5. **Outlining the shared contribution story.** A final and challenging step is to identify the evidence needed to support these stories and determine actual performance standards. This requires an assessment of what the available evidence shows, the filling of any evidence gaps and weighing the strength of the evidence.

⁴ Wider applicability will be tested in workshops conducted in a later stage of the overall project.

Identifying contribution stories provides a sound basis for developing a ToC with which to gain traction on seven basic questions:

1. How well founded were the ToC and people's contribution stories?
2. Were the selected activities the right ones?
3. Was each separate activity well managed and were synergies identified and exploited?
4. Were projects adapted and learned from appropriately?
5. What were the intended outcomes and how far did the project contribute to these?
6. Were unintended consequences identified and assessed?
7. (How) should the ToC be revised and adapted in the future?

Using contribution stories is not a sufficient reason for believing that outcomes are attributable to the activities, but it establishes both a baseline and a potential causal pathway to explore. This approach is also likely to identify possible unintended outcomes over time (again, these would need to be tested against the evidence). This approach therefore lends itself naturally to Real Time Evaluation (RTE).

4.3 **Real Time Evaluation allows the learning of lessons as activities progress by capturing feedback loops**

RTE is embedded evaluation whereby the reviewer/evaluator observes the activity and gathers data throughout the intervention or at critical junctures.

The products of RTE are periodic review reports on the logic of intervention. It should begin as early as possible in the activity and continue at intervals throughout its life (see Cosgrave *et al.* 2009). It is not necessary (and not desirable) for these to be time consuming. Each iteration following the initial establishing of the contribution story should be brief and focused on revising or confirming the original story. That will reflect on whether and how intended outcomes have been achieved and whether there have been unintended outcomes associated with the activity. There is no reason for respondents to be drawn only from civilian sources or to be professional evaluators. However, it is important for their potential biases to be taken into account and for a relatively independent evaluator/reviewer to be responsible for analysing these responses.

Developing the RTE, however, involves more than compiling and analysing the changing contribution stories. ToC needs to be evaluated against the evidence available. The categories of evidence, and the concepts behind them, should as far as possible be consistent, allowing comparison over time and between different areas. This can be difficult to achieve when the ToC is changing (see section 4.4).

Above all, the RTE should be oriented towards improvement and integrated into the planning cycle. The RTEs also provide the basic data for more substantial evaluations (possibly synthesising a number of RTEs) that may support learning.

4.4 **Evaluators need to establish what ‘good enough’ evidence is in stabilisation environments**

There are a number of factors for evaluators/reviewers to consider when deciding when evidence may be considered ‘good enough’.

The first is to consider evidence in a spectrum of types of evidence to assess how good it is. This would reflect on issues such as these:

1. Relevance of evidence – does it relate to what we need to know?
2. Robustness of data collection – does data collection apply recognised standards (e.g. could it be easily replicated)?
3. Systematic basis of evidence – is evidence somewhat anecdotal and ad hoc, or is it part of a more systematic body of knowledge (e.g. longitudinal data collection)?

The second factor is concerned with the legitimacy of the evidence. Even good evidence may be seen as illegitimate in the eyes of key stakeholders. To help gain ownership of these indicators, it is important to try to develop them with all parties involved in the stabilisation programme (Jones and Rathmell 2005a). Involving stakeholders (e.g. engaging with non-governmental organisations) may also be of the utmost help in the collection of data, ensuring linkages between different data collection exercises.

This leads to a third aspect of corroborating evidence. It seems to be important to use both quantitative and qualitative indicators in a complementary fashion in order to control, to as great an extent as is possible, for unreliable or incomplete information (de Coning and Romita 2009, Kessler *et al.* 2009, DfID 2010). Data from different datasets may be helpful as well.

The fourth aspect is seeing what the evidence can say about your ToC or causal pathway. This also ensures that data collection supports M&E activities. A coherent and comprehensive combination of outcome and process measures is desirable in order to avoid incomplete and misleading approximations, although it can be time consuming to use this (Scheye and Chigas 2009). Evidence should also tie inputs to outputs and outcomes (Jones and Rathmell 2005a). A final important aspect is that data can be collected over time in a consistent manner to continue to inform your intervention.

Continuity of data collection in ToC frameworks may be difficult to achieve. When a ToC is adjusted over time, the type of metrics collected may change and affect the collection. However, outcome and impact measures mostly remain the same, mitigating this challenge. What changes in typical cases is how activities link to outputs and outcomes.

Fifth, evidence needs to cover most of the areas relevant to stabilisation – hence the economic, social, political and security dimensions – and not just those that the programme being evaluated is targeting (Jones and Rathmell 2005a). This will help capture all relevant feedback loops – external intervening factors as well as causal relationships. We do not imply that all relevant aspects of stabilisation need to be measured, but that outcomes may be broader in scope than inputs and activities.

4.5 **Evaluators need to prioritise metrics and develop an indicator set to support monitoring and evaluation**

Making sense of data available is often a significant challenge. Though there are a number of factors involved in how we make sense of data collected in stabilisation interventions, prioritisation can help in this. Any prioritisation exercise may have to be revisited over time to ensure that the metrics are still relevant and appropriate. There are broadly two approaches to prioritisation, which may help with developing contribution stories and RTE approaches:

- 1) **The pragmatic approach.** This focuses specifically on the objectives of a stabilisation activity and how data can be collected feasibly. The campaign assessment in Bosnia is a good example (see Lambert 2002). This assessment incorporated grassroots indicators on the prices of major goods. Each data point had the potential for observable changes during the mission duration. Multinational soldiers with no local language had to be able to carry out data collection. Proxy indicators for economic recovery and conflict reduction had to be used. They consisted of the number of television aerials in villages and the reduction in the price of women's underwear. The indicators were set by operational analysts supporting senior commanders in the field, who assessed them for relevance and appropriateness.
- 2) **The reductionist approach.** This is based on mining information that is already collected (e.g. other agencies' monitoring systems, open-access databases) in order to allow evaluators, reviewers or programme staff to focus their efforts on collecting a smaller set of data (Kessler *et al.* 2009, USAID 2006). The normal way to reduce the number of indicators is to assess each dataset against independent criteria. An example is FABRIC (Cabinet Office 2001), which assesses whether data is:

Focused on the organisation's aims and objectives;

Appropriate to, and useful for, the stakeholders who are likely to use it;

Balanced, giving a picture of what the organisation is doing, covering all significant areas of work;

Robust, in order to withstand organisational changes or individuals leaving;

Integrated into the organisation, being part of the business planning and management processes;

Cost effective, balancing the benefits of the information against the costs.

The output of such an approach is a range of indicators, which may be further prioritised in a dashboard. This is of course only one way to display data. This type of exercise is particularly well suited to prioritising data in data-rich environments.

4.6 **Stabilisation places some further demands on how data are prioritised and collected**

Finally, it is important to note that the stabilisation environment, being by its nature interested in changes in perceptions and behaviour, has two further important consequences for how data is prioritised and collected:

- **Prioritisation.** The assessment of whether progress has been made and whether objectives have been achieved has to be clearly informed by the perceptions and behaviour of local individuals and organisations. Their views on progress and behaviour are more relevant than external views on progress. Perception data are often difficult to interpret in terms of establishing a baseline or trends. As such, they require additional corroboration from other sources of information.
- **Data collection.** Arriving at judgements on behaviour and perceptions may require a range of methodologies, including sociological and anthropological approaches. An example would be the use of observational analysis in communities and important meetings. The challenge of stabilisation and consequently of M&E in stabilisation is to use state-of-the-art qualitative and quantitative approaches and make the most of the evidence available. The use of such methodologies may be compromised by difficulties in gathering data in insecure and dangerous areas. This in turn has consequences for what is considered good enough evidence and how to prioritise data.

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Annex 1: A number of theories of change applicable to stabilisation interventions

DfID (2010), drawing upon Church and Rogers (2006), suggests a number of different theories of change that may be relevant to stabilisation activities. These are paraphrased below:

- Individual change theory: stabilisation comes through the transformative change of a critical mass of people, including their knowledge, attitude, behaviours and skills.
- Healthy relationships and connections theory: stabilisation comes from breaking down isolation, polarisation, division, prejudice and stereotypes between/among groups.
- Withdrawal of the resources of war theory: war requires vast amounts of material and human capital to be sustained. If the supply of people and goods is disrupted, the war-making system will collapse.
- Reduction of violence theory: stabilisation results from a reduction in the level of violence perpetrated by combatants.
- Root causes / justice theory: stabilisation can be achieved by addressing the underlying issues of injustice, oppression, exploitation, threats to identity and security, and people's sense of injury and victimisation.
- Institutional development theory: stabilisation is secured by establishing social institutions that guarantee democracy, equity, justice and fair allocation of resources.
- Political elites theory: stabilisation comes about when it is in the interest of political (and other) leaders to take the necessary steps. Peace-building efforts must change the political calculus of leaders and elites.
- Grassroots mobilisation theory: if enough people are mobilised to support stabilisation, political leaders will have to pay attention.
- Economic theory: individuals and leaders make decision about war and peace based on systems of incentives that are essentially economic in nature. By changing the economic logic associated with war, we can bring about stabilisation.
- Public attitudes theory: war and violence are partly motivated by prejudice, misperceptions and intolerance of difference. We can promote stabilisation by

using the media (television and radio) to change public attitudes and build greater tolerance in society.

Annex 2: OECD-DAC approach to monitoring and evaluation

OECD-DAC guidance (2002) distinguishes between ‘monitoring’, ‘reviewing’ and ‘evaluation’ as follows:

- ‘Monitoring’ refers to the systematic collection of data and information to provide those involved in an intervention or programme with adequate information to monitor progress against objectives and outcomes. It is different from reporting in that monitoring refers to the collection and interpretation of information and not the delivery of information.
- ‘Review’ and ‘evaluation’ are similar. An evaluation is a systematic and objective assessment of a completed intervention. Evaluation determines the relevance, appropriateness and fulfilment of objectives. It looks at efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should enable decision-makers to judge the relative worth of a programme and draw lessons for other and future programmes. A review tends to be less in depth than an evaluation and can be done more regularly and throughout an intervention.

A metrics and evaluation framework should have clear purposes. Delivering effective M&E should help (taken from OECD-DAC 2002):

- establish realistic goals and timescales;
- spread understanding of shared goals;
- integrate different activities and securing synergies;
- strengthen learning, adaptation and improvement;
- entrench accountability in appropriate ways.

Annex 3: Research methodology

This report presents the findings from the first phase of the assignment that the UK's Stabilisation Unit commissioned RAND Europe. The aim of phase 1 is to draft a think piece on what is considered current practice in M&E frameworks in stabilisation interventions and identify a number of steps that could be taken forwards to improve the M&E of stabilisation interventions. The aim of the subsequent phase, phase 2, is to develop guidance to assist strategic planners, in conjunction with the Stabilisation Unit.

Phase 1 of the project started in June 2010 and was completed in December 2010. It involved two main steps:

- 1) First, the RAND research team reviewed the literature on monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation environments. It identified this literature through a targeted search on Google (“monitoring and evaluation of stabilisation interventions” and synonyms and combinations thereof) and by asking every interviewee (see next step) for key references.
- 2) Second, RAND conducted 22 semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour with individuals from the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank (see acknowledgements page). The interview questionnaire was structured around the following three themes and included around thirty sub-questions :
 - In your experience, how are stabilisation efforts evaluated?
 - What do you feel are the challenges to an effective monitoring and evaluation of stabilisation programmes?
 - In your view, what is best practice in monitoring and evaluation of stabilisation programmes?