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Monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation interventions

Reviewing the state of the art and suggesting ways forward

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

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.