

States of fragility: stabilisation and its implications for humanitarian action

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This paper explores the evolution of international stabilisation agendas and their significance for humanitarian action. Stabilisation includes a combination of military, humanitarian, political and economic activities to control, contain and manage areas affected by armed conflict and complex emergencies. Encompassing narrow security objectives and broader peace-building efforts, stabilisation is both a conservative and potentially transformative, comprehensive and long-term agenda. The open-ended approach allows for widely varying interpretations and applications in different circumstances and by different actors with an assortment of implications for humanitarian action. The relationship between the two is highly uncertain and contentious, due not only to the controversies surrounding stabilisation policies, but also to deep-seated ambiguities at the heart of humanitarianism. While humanitarian actors are preoccupied with the growing involvement of the military in the humanitarian sphere, the paper argues that it is trends in the humanitarian–political interface that represent the more fundamental dilemma.

Keywords: civil–military, conflict, fragile states, humanitarianism, peace-building, securitisation, stabilisation, war

Introduction

This paper explores the evolution of international stabilisation agendas and their significance for humanitarian action. The analysis draws on policy discussions led by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the London-based Overseas Development Institute (ODI) during 2009 and early 2010 and a series of case studies through which the authors sought to scrutinise the nature and evolution of stabilisation efforts in a range of different country settings.¹ The overall goal was to examine critically how stabilisation agendas are potentially influencing the international security and political context of humanitarian action. A selection of these case studies—focused on Afghanistan (Stuart Gordon), Colombia (Samir Elhawary), Haiti (Robert Muggah), Somalia (Ken Menkhous), Sri Lanka (Jonathan Goodhand) and Timor-Leste (Elisabeth Lothe and Gordon Peake)—make up the other submissions to this special issue of *Disasters*,² with additional contributions analysing the historical antecedents of stabilisation (Sultan Barakat, Seán Deely and Steven A. Zyck) and the humanitarian response to the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan (Andrew Wilder).

Taken together, the findings reveal how stabilisation agendas seem to be exerting a powerful and pervasive influence over Western foreign policy towards fragile states

and, increasingly, over United Nations (UN) engagement in these contexts. Most international policy discussions on stabilisation are fixated on experiences in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, Iraq. Humanitarian actors, meanwhile, seem hardly engaged with the stabilisation discourse, despite the potentially profound implications of this agenda for the political and security conditions shaping humanitarian crises and responses to them. A narrow focus on Afghanistan and Iraq appears to be obscuring the much wider geographical and historical reach and significance of stabilisation. If stabilisation is understood to encompass a combination of military, humanitarian, political and economic instruments to render ‘stability’ to areas affected by armed conflict and complex emergencies, it exhibits a much broader transformative, geographical and historical scope, as demonstrated by the contributions to this special issue. For example, Barakat, Deely and Zyck’s contribution shows clearly how, in the long and varied history of powerful states’ (liberal and illiberal) interventions in other societies and states, contemporary stabilisation efforts closely resemble those of the past and constitute a subtly distinct chapter in a much longer story.

International interventions seeking to ‘stabilise’ and mitigate perceived security threats posed by weak and fragile states typically involve integrated ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of intervention, both military and civilian. This implies an explicit securitisation of North–South relations, which, in turn, has led to a pervasive sense 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—‘humanitarian space’—are contracting. While humanitarian actors are clearly pre-occupied with the growing engagement of the military in ostensibly humanitarian activities (and associated debates over civil–military relations or civil–military co-operation (CIMIC)), this paper argues that it is trends in the humanitarian–political interface that represent an even more fundamental challenge. Indeed, the significance and implications of any tactical engagement—military or otherwise—are inevitably defined by the political and strategic interests that underpin it. Despite broad attachment to principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality, humanitarian agencies are also themselves political players, operating in complex and highly-charged political environments, and are increasingly compelled to assess how they ought (or ought not) to relate to other political actors and their agendas.

The paper first explores the evolution and content of ‘stabilisation’ as a discourse and set of policies, and the challenges of translating these into practice. While high on the international diplomatic, security and development agendas, 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 control of (unregulated) migration flows. Yet it also overlaps substantially with other broader-ranging policy arenas, including peace-making, peace-building, peace-enforcement, reconstruction, state-building, development and humanitarian action. ‘Stabilisation’ is thus simultaneously constructed as a short-term and conservative project and a potentially transformative, comprehensive and long-term project,

possibly entailing substantial social, political and economic change. Of course, the open-ended nature of stabilisation allows for widely varying interpretations and applications. Moreover, while stabilisation as a term has been used mainly by Western governments and shaped by their political and strategic interests and priorities, the discourse is also taking root within the UN and a growing array of regional organisations, and among a number of governments in conflict-affected countries keen to recast what might previously have been labelled civil wars and political crises as legitimate 'stabilisation' efforts (as illustrated by Samir Elhawary's evaluation of stabilisation in Colombia).

The paper next 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-rooted ambiguities at the heart of humanitarianism. This is reflected in continuing tension between the recognition that humanitarian action cannot substitute for robust political and security engagement to address the causes of humanitarian crisis, and in 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. Tellingly, 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 a piece of the broader stabilisation puzzle, it is not one that fits easily.

The importance of looking beyond Afghanistan and Iraq 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' are viewed by their advocates in the United States 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.

In the concluding discussion, the paper considers what stabilisation might mean for humanitarian actors in the near future. Despite their unease, in practice many humanitarian actors are involved in a wide range of activities that potentially overlap with various aspects of stabilisation, including medium-to-long-term recovery, peace-building, development and human-rights work. Any coherence between these

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.

Stabilisation: a pervasive but unsettled agenda

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 pose a direct threat to their strategic interests and international peace and security more broadly. This is because ‘islands of instability’ are seen as constituting sources of regional insecurity and contagion, particularly in their association with international terrorism, transnational crime and other real and existential threats (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, accumulated 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, Haiti and Timor-Leste, stabilisation has emerged therefore as a key instrument of a broader liberal, transformative peace-building project. As such, it extends beyond short-term or conservative objectives to eliminate immediate threats or merely to ‘stabilise’ temporarily 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 United Kingdom Minister of Defence 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 [non-governmental organisations], and our and other countries’ aid programmes’ (*The Guardian*, 2010).

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 good (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, 2006; Cornish, 2009) and that development and security are themselves symbiotic and mutually reinforcing (see Duffield, 2001). This view 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—as reviewed critically by Cramer (2006). As such, developmental interventions are expected to bolster security by providing immediate peace dividends and legitimising a host government or intervening force; security, in turn, creates the virtuous cycle that fosters longer-term development that is assumed to consolidate peace. In this way, 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) labelled ‘securing development’ and more critical scholars describe as ‘securitising development’ (Duffield, 2007).

The explicit 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 PSKOI, 2009, p. 3). The RAND Corporation views stabilisation as incorporating ‘efforts to develop or redevelop institutions that foster self-governance, social and economic development’ (Bensahel, Oliker and Peterson, 2009, p. ix). These and other doctrinal claims are increasingly becoming received wisdom at the field level. In their contribution on Timor-Leste, Elisabeth Lothe and Gordon Peake note how both military and civilian actors frequently define the objective of their development and peace-building interventions as ‘bringing about stability’.

Without testing or challenging these basic assumptions, Western states moved swiftly to incorporate development priorities and humanitarian assistance into their evolving military doctrine on stabilisation. A 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, p. 15). The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) 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, p. xv).

Stabilisation is also increasingly employed in UN policy debates and missions and the UN’s peacekeeping doctrine and broader engagements in crisis contexts have similarly sought to integrate different policy spheres (Eide et al., 2005). UN peace-support missions are to be guided by a new doctrine—the ‘Capstone Doctrine’—which reflects the fact that these missions are often required to play an active role in peace-making, including enforcement action, and may also be involved in early

peace-building activities (UN DPKO, 2008; Muggah, 2009). 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' (UN DPKO, 2008, p. 23). Meanwhile, certain governments are pursuing their own domestic 'stabilisation' campaigns: Samir Elhawary, in his contribution focused on Colombia, cites the Colombian government's 'Presidential Directive 01' of 2009 that calls for enhanced CIMIC in order to use development instrumentally to promote security in unstable areas, presumably guerrilla and paramilitary-controlled zones.

Despite these converging trends, the core aims 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. Approaches tend to be divided between, on the one hand, prioritising security imperatives and taking direct and immediate action to counter perceived threats such as insurgents or terrorists, and, on the other, pursuing wider peace-building, state-building and development goals. Whereas counter-insurgency is typically the primary focus of engagement, stabilisation discourse has tended to favour a 'security-first' approach, including in the US-led engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq (Lindley-French, 2009). Such a perspective emphasises the role of external actors in enforcing a political settlement through 'regime change' and the defeat of an insurgency, with the goal of creating conditions for a subsequent government-led transition towards peace. As Stuart Gordon notes in his contribution, security and stability are the desired end of US-led operations in Afghanistan, with development and humanitarian activities seen as a means to achieve these goals and ultimately to legitimise the Afghan government and an internationally-sponsored political settlement.

The UK government's stabilisation discourse gives greater weight to the importance of politics in contributing to a non-violent political settlement or interim accommodation (Stabilisation Unit, 2008). This may involve using military force to prevent and reduce violence and promote the protection of civilians, assets and institutions, but the central aim is supporting the development of a viable and legitimate state (Stabilisation Unit, 2008). The effort to build a state that is capable and willing to maintain short-term stability and counter transnational threats, however, could ultimately undermine the development of an accountable and legitimate government and state apparatus in the longer term if immediate stabilisation depends on creating and supporting 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 is, in essence, about powerful states seeking to forge, secure or support a particular 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 appear to have changed are the specific strategic and tactical objectives pursued. In the post-Cold War and post-11 September 2001 (9/11) era, these are likely to be articulated by Western governments as broadly consistent with liberal peace-building and/or a security discourse defined by 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 Colombia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the concept or label of stabilisation can be readily hitched to domestic counter-insurgency campaigns or civil war without being tied explicitly to liberal peace-building goals. These might involve a distinctly different mixture 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. As Jonathan Goodhand observes in his contribution on activities under way in eastern Sri Lanka, the government, supported by a number of emerging powers and some Western donors, has so far sought to consolidate its control and promote 'stability' through targeted economic development and the maintenance of a heavy security presence.

As witnessed in Afghanistan and Iraq, 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 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 are 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 public institutions, for example, may correspond broadly with the type of political order that external actors seek to achieve, but that does not mean that the insurgency has been defeated, that the government is considered authoritative or legitimate, or that services will be delivered, all of which would have a crucial bearing on the nature and durability of the 'stability' achieved.

Stabilisation in practice: complex, contradictory and competitive

In order to secure or support a particular political dispensation, stabilisation efforts routinely mobilise a combination of military, political, development and humanitarian resources. Higher-profile international stabilisation operations rely heavily on direct international military and political intervention (such as in Afghanistan) while others support direct political intervention but weaker international military engagement (such as in the Horn of Africa). Still other stabilisation interventions feature diplomatic and development engagement combined with military aid to support

nationally-led military campaigns (such as US policy on 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. These entail 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 the policy and operational level—the ‘3-Cs’ (Hoyos and Muggah, 2009). The focus tends to be 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.

Bureaucratically, many Western countries, including Australia, Canada, France, Switzerland, the UK and the US, have established cross-departmental working groups and units to identify cross-sector priorities, to refine and revise policy positions on stabilisation strategies (from arms control and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) to security sector reform (SSR) and the deployment of peace-keepers), and to align domestic priorities with international or regional commitments. In the wake of its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, the US government established the Department of State Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). Consolidated in 2005, the S/CRS is expected to promote inter-agency management between the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), country offices and military commanders (Patrick and Brown, 2007). It combines country-specific teams, integration planning cells and civilian response capacity. In the UK, the Stabilisation Unit (SU) brings together the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the MoD, and it has also developed a deployable civilian response capacity.³ Meanwhile, Canada’s Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START), established in 2005, assembles multiple government departments including the Canadian International Development Agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Department of Justice, the Department of National Defence and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (START, 2006). Likewise, Australia has also announced an Australian Civilian Corps to support its humanitarian and development efforts and to ensure a smooth transition from one to the other (AusAid, 2010).

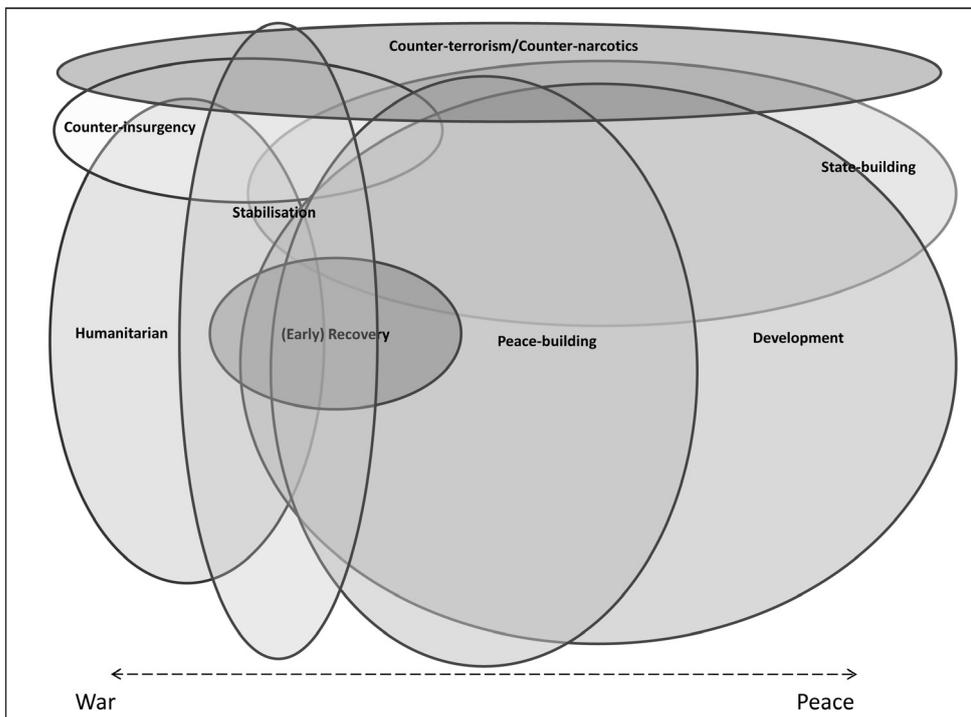
The UN’s ‘integrated mission’ structure (or ‘integrated peace operations’) similarly seeks to create greater coherence between its multiple components within an overall political-strategic crisis-management framework (Eide et al., 2005). Practically, integrated missions are expected to bring the UN’s resources and activities closer together at country level and to ensure that they are applied in a coherent manner across the political, military, developmental and humanitarian sectors, which is regarded as a prerequisite for tackling closely intertwined peace-support and peace-building challenges (Eide et al., 2005). For example, the UN’s 2006 ‘Integrated Missions Planning Process (IMPP)’ guidelines specify that ‘[i]ntegration calls upon all actors to maximize efficiency and effectiveness of the UN presence at country level, including through minimizing duplication and optimizing available logistical, human, and

financial resources to meet the combined mandates of the various components of the UN presence' (Jennings and Kaspersen, 2008, pp. 445–446, quoting UN, 2006, p. 4). The UN Security Council has sought to weave the discourse of stabilisation to the veritable core of integrated peace-support operations. In July 2010, for instance, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) was transformed into the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Likewise, as Robert Muggah shows in his contribution on Haiti, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) has endorsed an array of stabilisation interventions since its inception in 2004.

On the ground, these and other 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 (PRTs) to provide relief and reconstruction support. In the Horn of Africa, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has created a Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF-HOA) that channels humanitarian and development assistance in Muslim communities in Kenya (Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010).

Notwithstanding these institutional innovations, stabilisation policy targets are routinely poorly defined and contradictory, usually with little indication of what kinds of specific initiatives might or might not prove effective. As illustrated in Figure 1,

Figure 1 Overlaps between stabilisation and other policy spheres



Source: authors.

stabilisation features multiple and overlapping arenas of intervention and assistance. Although these institutional changes seek to promote greater policy coherence and coordination, they are also often characterised by competing objectives, priorities, time frames and principles. For example, contributions to a 2008 special edition of *International Peacekeeping*, devoted to reviewing progress of the UN's integrated missions, highlighted a number of serious challenges in implementation. These ranged from a lack of incentives and shared institutional and political commitment to overcoming the administrative and organisational demands of integration, an apparent inability or unwillingness among different actors within and without the UN system to 'speak the same language', a related resistance to integration arising from a fear of being subordinated to the mission's security components, as well as a basic failure to agree on the terms of what is supposedly being integrated (Jennings and Kaspersen, 2008, p. 444). Likewise, Elisabeth Lothe and Gordon Peake observe in their contribution how the stitching together of the various actors and institutions and their different initiatives and approaches within a common implementation structure is frequently difficult: if integration cannot succeed in Timor-Leste, with its relatively small size and population, they question whether it can be achieved anywhere.

Part of the problem lies in the inherent contradictions between conservative and transformative objectives, and from the breathless ambition of stabilisation to begin with. As Paris and Sisk (2008, p. 1) point out in respect of post-conflict peacebuilding, 'it is difficult to imagine a more complex and demanding task'. Indeed, the aspirations and prescriptions of stabilisation and reconstruction are arguably 'becoming so complicated that they defy implementation' (Marina Ottaway, quoted in Cramer, 2006, p. 257). Under the heading of 'security', for example, tasks may include: DDR, SSR and specific reforms targeting the oversight and functions of the armed forces, police and intelligence services, customs agencies, defence and finance ministries, budget and audit offices, and the judiciary. In some cases, these efforts may themselves require engagement with formal and informal governance institutions, the engineering of new electoral laws and accountability mechanisms, constitution drafting and implementation, and the financing and training of civil society entities. Add to this the imperatives of economic reconstruction and reform, along with relief and support to refugees and the displaced and stabilisation quickly becomes 'an almost endless array of reforms concerning everything from the banking system to commercial codes' (Cramer, 2006, pp. 257–258).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the ambitions of stabilisation appear to have significantly outstripped achievements on the ground in most of the countries reviewed in this special issue of *Disasters*. 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 in one area have the potential to generate unforeseen results in other areas; and peacebuilding agencies have only limited knowledge of what is required to succeed. Elisabeth Lothe and Gordon Peake observe how in Timor-Leste stabilisation 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 USD 3.6 billion of 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 and continues to suffer instability. In Afghanistan, the creation of an extreme and highly corrupt ‘rentier state’ fundamentally contradicts the primary stabilisation goal of establishing a sustainable, legitimate and accountable government (Suhrke, 2008). In Pakistan, US financial support to the armed forces 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 meet its responsibilities to those affected by the conflict (Duplat and Rendon, 2010). The contributions from Stuart Gordon on Afghanistan and Ken Menkhaus on Somalia highlight how 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 stabilisation interventions are apparently seeking to counter. 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 are premised on empirically weak and poorly grounded assumptions. In counter-insurgency contexts, for example, ‘quick-impact’ projects (QIPs) are widely regarded as useful tools to shore up the legitimacy of intervening forces and to win local support, thereby undermining support for the insurgents. It is expected that these activities will perform a necessary short-term security function that in turn will enhance the space for longer-term development. In Afghanistan, this is reflected in the concentration of development funds in insecure, fragile or so-called ungoverned areas that are the focus of stabilisation and counter-insurgency efforts. In 2007, one-half of USAID’s assistance programme in Afghanistan was focused on only four provinces, where there is a high presence of insurgents (Wilder and Gordon, 2009). Yet the relationship between externally-driven development and security is almost certainly more complex than anticipated by supporters of this approach. While it is likely that the exclusion of certain groups from basic services and economic opportunities may have a part to play in driving or contributing to violence (see, for example, Goodhand, 2001), the QIP approach is arguably far too crude to tackle the highly sensitive, varied and unpredictable relationships between grievance, violence and insurgency in conflict-affected countries such as Afghanistan. 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 shortfalls 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. Stuart Gordon notes how in Afghanistan's Helmand Province the UK has sought to stimulate political engagement between local residents and their provincial leaders, but 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.

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 occurring 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 ought to 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 Weiss, 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 activities. This principled approach posits an 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 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 clear political consequences, irrespective of whether it has political aims at the outset. In reality, few humanitarian agencies restrict their activities to immediate and short-term lifesaving

and relief activities. As Stuart Gordon observes, the role attributed to humanitarian assistance and broader service delivery in stabilisation discourse can be partly attributed to evolving debates within the aid sector concerning the relationship between relief, service delivery and development. During the 1990s, aid actors advocated for integrating relief and development interventions in protracted conflict-affected crises, arguing that relief should not be seen just as palliative, but also as a means for communities to recover and strengthen their livelihoods (Macrae and Harmer, 2004). More than a decade on, attention is focusing on closing of the gap between relief and development in 'early recovery' contexts (Bailey and Pavanello, 2009). Many of the largest humanitarian agencies are also engaging in post-conflict peace-building activities (Barnett and Snyder 2008). This stems from the idea that the delivery of health, education, and water and sanitation services are critical building-blocks in reducing state fragility and supporting broader transformation and longer-term development (OECD, 2006; Pavanello and Darcy, 2008).

Humanitarian agencies' de facto long-term engagement with societies affected by protracted or recurrent crises and the parallel expansion in post-conflict support means that, despite their attachment to the principles of humanitarian action, most agencies straddle the relief-development-security divides.

In practice, if not in principle, many agencies have come to accept the imperative of a transformative agenda. Thus, relief agencies are directly or indirectly seeking to influence the causes and risks that shape vulnerability and suffering among populations. Consequently, they accept the corollary (implicit or explicit) political intentions that these actions imply (Barnett and Snyder, 2008). What has yet to emerge, however, is a coherent humanitarian paradigm that incorporates political, military, development or judicial action to achieve humanitarian objectives. Instead, humanitarian action is still largely defined in terms that exclude or even reject broader responses to humanitarian crises. This, as Barnett and Weiss (2008, p. 5) suggest, reflects an anxiety among many humanitarian actors over what defines humanitarian identity, triggered by a variety of developments within and without the humanitarian sector that have 'weakened once reasonably settled distinctions between humanitarianism and other areas of social life'. These anxieties are also sharpened by the belief among some belligerents that humanitarian agencies are active or partial actors to the wider conflict. This is reflected in apprehension, sometimes hostility, in the relationships between certain specialised humanitarian agencies and other actors leading international stabilisation efforts or actively cooperating in these efforts, including multi-mandate organisations. Commenting on the role of multi-mandate agencies in Afghanistan, Médecins Sans Frontières (Hofman and Delauney, 2010, p. 6) argued that, '[a]lthough there is no fundamental opposition between relief and development assistance, there is a need to make distinctions, in particular when a conflict is ongoing', since, '[n]o matter the intent, organizations that engage in a development or nation-building agenda during a conflict will be perceived as taking sides . . . multi-mandate organizations should make a choice between relief and development assistance, a choice between saving lives today or saving societies tomorrow' (for a similar commentary along these lines, see Donini, 2010).

Efforts to maximise humanitarian space and achievement of 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. This engagement will require sophisticated political and economic analysis and calculations based on the objectives that each agency is seeking to achieve. It does not mean abandoning the core principles of humanitarian action. As Leader (2000, p. 47) 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’. 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.

To appreciate fully the significance of stabilisation policies for humanitarian agencies, it is crucial first to grasp 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—that is, 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 Province between 2006 and 2009, the UK’s PRTs engaged in identifying and managing QIPs and providing military medical assistance. Other types of stabilisation interventions may contribute positively to agency space, but not necessarily to humanitarian outcomes. This happens, for instance, 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, p. 118; see also *The New York Times*, 1992).

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 Khyber–Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly the North-West Frontier Province), during which humanitarian access was severely restricted and vulnerable civilian populations were exposed to significant physical threats. In his contribution on Somalia, Ken Menkhaus observes that 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) 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 party to the ongoing war

and to associated abuses of civilian populations. Menkhaus observes that 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 pretence 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.

Finally, stabilisation operations may simultaneously protect agency space and humanitarian outcomes, for example where stabilisation efforts succeed in preventing or reducing violence *and* enable unimpeded access for relief organisations. Robert Muggah reports, for instance, how 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 'community security programmes', with MINUSTAH undertaking coercive actions in key urban areas, notably Bel Air and Cité Soleil in Port au Prince. 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 socioeconomic 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. Elisabeth Lothe and Gordon Peake observe how the deployment of international military and police forces in Timor-Leste in 1999 and 2006 contributed to rapidly reduced levels of violence, paving the way for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

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 this is reflected in donors' support (or not) for humanitarian action as opposed to recovery, state-building and other more political 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. In relation to Somalia, for instance, Ken Menkhaus shows how easily humanitarian access can become a political target: 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, Ken Menkhaus suggests, contribute to highly dysfunctional relations between stabilisation initiatives and humanitarian access.

In his contribution on the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, Andrew Wilder reports how the stabilisation agenda generated additional leverage to garner donor funds for victims. Yet, in the current context of conflict and mass displacement in Pakistan, stabilisation priorities appear to have led international donors to sideline humanitarian assistance in favour of (potentially vast) 'post-conflict' recovery and development finance, intended to be channelled to the Pakistan state through a World Bank-administered multi-donor trust fund (see, for instance, PHF, 2010; and Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

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 neutral humanitarian action, while on the other it is also looking to support stabilisation, state-building and peace-building, emphasising integrated approaches. Moreover, as Jones (2004) notes, the UN bureaucracy has no defined set of 'national' interests in a given country, which, for better or for 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 a resolution to conflicts and deploy peacekeeping missions to implement peace agreements. However, as the UN has moved towards more direct involvement in multi-dimensional peacekeeping and peace-building, it has had to take on more deliberate and sometimes forceful and partisan forms of political engagement. 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 Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for example, the UN 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 in piloting the 'One UN' approach imply that the UN has been very cautious in its positioning on the crisis. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia, the UN 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. It is not clear what it has achieved in relation to short- or long-term stabilisation in these contexts.

Many humanitarian actors recognise the need for the international community, including the UN, to adopt more coherent and robust political and military approaches to conflict-affected or unstable environments. At the same time, though, they are extremely wary of the extent to which the UN's integrated mission structures might subordinate humanitarian imperatives and negatively affect the perceptions of humanitarian agencies. Debate within the UN on the role of integrated missions has consequently been extremely contentious and protracted (Harmer, 2008), with sometimes forceful resistance by the specialised humanitarian agencies and the UN's humanitarian leadership to the 'pro-integrationist' agenda (see, for example,

UNOCHA, 2009; see also Donini et al., 2008). While some commentators suggest that humanitarian assistance and ‘humanitarian space’ might be better protected through integrated structures by bringing the humanitarian perspective to the centre of the mission itself (Eide et al., 2005), there is unlikely to be strong support for this argument within the humanitarian camp for as long as political aims are seen to override humanitarian concerns.

The uncertain future of stabilisation and challenges for humanitarianism

Gauging the implications of stabilisation for humanitarian organisations and the broader humanitarian agenda (and vice-versa) will require identifying the most powerful actors’ core political and security objectives, how local and national actors and beneficiaries respond, and whether these accord or not with primary humanitarian priorities. To the extent that both seek positive change, humanitarianism and stabilisation, at least at the ‘softer’ end, potentially have much in common. Humanitarian action may also 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, such as civilian protection. Yet manifest disquiet within the humanitarian camp persists over the means and possibly the goals of international stabilisation in environments such as Afghanistan, Pakistan 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 and counter-insurgency agendas may be in the ascendant. Beyond specific tensions in particular stabilisation contexts, perhaps the greatest impediment to achieving increased 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. 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.

In practice, humanitarian agencies are likely to face very different challenges according to the different faces of ‘stabilisation’ in different political settings. 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 political risks and seek uncertain political bargains with a complex

ecosystem of local, national and international 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, 2008) 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 affect decisively 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; they are likely to leave it to the UN and regional organisations to handle crisis situations of lesser strategic priority and 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 Colombia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, humanitarian agencies will continue to face tough choices concerning presence and the possibility that their engagement might be serving the interests of the state, rather than the humanitarian or liberal peace-building objectives that they may espouse.

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 may continue to face the extreme moral and practical hazards associated with restricting assistance to short-term material relief or de facto service delivery in complex and protracted environments. Or, indeed, humanitarian agencies may face a forced retreat from these environments entirely due to insecurity and a lack of effective access. This is likely to be the case where international or national political and military actors see little utility in allowing humanitarian agencies to operate freely. 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, Harmer and DiDomenico, 2009). Furthermore, the dilemma remains as to how they should position themselves in contexts where mass human rights violations are taking place and international intervention might be deemed necessary for the protection of civilians.

Despite the 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, Pakistan and Somalia. Paradoxically, 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 stabilisation agenda if it really does appear to deliver on its promises. 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' 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 stabilisation experience is likely to weaken fundamentally even the more willing and pragmatic aid agencies' association with comprehensive stabilisation and peace-building, not least because these efforts have not delivered the kinds of improvements in humanitarian space and humanitarian outcomes that they consider paramount.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For more information see <http://www.odi.org.uk/work/programmes/humanitarian-policy-group/focus-principles-policy-coherence.asp> and <http://www.iheid.ch/ccdp/projects-statesoffragility.html>.
- ² Other inputs into the HPG study that informed this paper but are not included in this special issue include mini case studies by Adam Forbes on Burundi, Marcia Hartwell on Iraq, and Tahir Ali on Pakistan.
- ³ See, for example, <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/>.

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