

INTRODUCTION

The term “stabilisation”, while not new to Sida, has become more commonly used in recent years. As formulated in *Development Assistance for a new era – freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth* (2023), the Government of Sweden intends to “promote peace efforts, including conflict prevention and stabilisation, in order to reduce conflicts that drive increased humanitarian needs.”¹ The Strategy for peace, security and stabilisation 2024 – 2028, which replaces the previous global strategy for sustainable peace, has similar wording.

There is no internationally agreed definition of “stabilisation”. Broadly speaking, there are two different understandings of the concept: 1) as a broad term that encompasses activities that aim to support durable peace and security, and 2) as a particular type of comprehensive external interventions in certain phases of a conflict with the aim to contain violence and support peace and security. In order to keep these two different definitions of stabilisation apart, this Technical Note will refer to the former as “stabilisation” and the latter as either “stabilisation facilities” or “stabilisation missions”.

The objective is to provide Sida’s programme managers and other staff that come into contact with stabilisation and/or stabilisation facilities with guidance about key elements to consider in order to manage the particular opportunities, challenges and risks raised in relation to stabilisation and stabilisation facilities. It is thus relevant to those working broadly to support peace, security and stability, in addition to those who work in contexts where stabilisation facilities are considered or implemented.

STABILISATION AS EFFORTS THAT GENERALLY SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND SECURITY

Sometimes the term stabilisation is understood as a broad range of activities that have as their main objective to support peace and security that is durable (stable) over time. According to this understanding the concept is closely related to – and even indistinguishable from – peacebuilding and human security.

A note on peace and stabilisation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark explicitly operates with “a combined definition of peacebuilding and stabilisation interventions” with the motivation that “the officials

*involved need not make a clearcut distinction between peacebuilding and stabilisation, as long as interventions rest upon solid conflict analysis and otherwise contribute to achieving peace.”*²

According to this understanding of the concept, the primary goal of stabilisation is always durable peace and it could encompass a wide variety of activities, the same kind of activities that can also be referred to as peacebuilding.

This very broad understanding of the term “stabilisation” is quite new. It is arguably the understanding of stabilisation that is most relevant to Sida’s efforts to support sustainable results in working for peace, security and stability in different contexts and partner countries.

In a few cases (so far), Sida is involved in stabilisation facilities, or in contexts where other donors support stabilisation facilities, where the word “stabilisation” is used in a more particular and narrow sense, to which we now turn (next section, here below).

STABILISATION FACILITIES

In certain contexts, stabilisation efforts are carried out in the form of **external interventions**, referred to as facilities or missions, that have certain features in common. Stabilisation in this sense of the word rose to prominence following the conflicts in former Yugoslavia of the 1990’s, the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 and the international interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.³ Originally conceptualised in the context of military interventions⁴, the conceptualisation of stabilisation facilities or missions have broadened and now tend to focus more on civilian and political aspects through the application of a **wide range of diplomatic, development and security policy instruments**.⁵ An example of such an understanding of stabilisation is this formulation by the German Federal Foreign Office:

¹ Government of Sweden, *Development Assistance for a New Era – Freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth*, December 14 2023, p. 19.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark: *How-to-note for implementation of “The World We Share”: Peacebuilding and Stabilisation* [Augusti 2022], p. 5.

³ Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF) / Wittkowsky; Andreas, Breuer, Sebastian: *Twenty-five years of stabilisation discourse: between Realpolitik and Normativity* (2020), p. 11–12.

⁴ The first international operation to feature the word “stabilisation” was the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1996–2004). The UN has mandated a number of peace operations as stabilisation operations, and all of them have had a strong military mandate and component. More information can be found in for instance: Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF) / Wittkowsky; Andreas, Breuer, Sebastian: *Twenty-five years of stabilisation discourse: between Realpolitik and Normativity* (2020).

⁵ Ibid, p. 44, 46.

“Stabilisation facilities offer a framework within which, as an international donor, the Federal Foreign Office can enter into a stabilisation partnership with national and regional actors in the partner country [...] Measures are usually designed to facilitate the return of the state or to strengthen the state’s positive presence and its key function: providing security and basic services based on a relationship of trust with the population.”⁶

Increasing state presence and state service delivery is often understood as key goals of stabilisation facilities. But, as an Interpeace report points out, recent approaches to stabilisation

“appear increasingly open to the idea that ‘legitimate’ institutions that need strengthening are not always formal and not always located in a distant capital, especially in countries that have not had strong governments for many years, if ever.”⁷

The common denominator in both cases is that stabilisation facilities **take sides for a state or non-state authority deemed as legitimate**. Who gets to define the level of legitimacy and how that is determined is of course a key question (see guiding questions below). Furthermore, if the legitimate state or non-state authority is engaged in armed conflict, taking sides for it amounts to taking sides in conflict. The appropriateness of doing so is a political decision.

The transition effort itself is meant to be **limited in time**. An EU source describes stabilisation as “a transitory or bridging period” that generates “a more stable political settlement” by “helping countries and/or communities to prevent or reduce violence.”⁸

Furthermore, stabilisation is usually understood as something that is undertaken “close to a hot phase of a violent conflict”⁹ with the aim to contain or reduce the violence. “Early stabilisation” is meant to lay the ground for humanitarian access as well as long-term development and peacebuilding (in the form of support to a peace process), at least in theory. In practice, in areas considered suitable for stabilisation facilities, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors and perhaps also development actors would probably already be working, responding to needs arising in a context of armed conflict. Sometimes stabilisation is described instead as something that is undertaken not in order to establish conditions for a peace process, but rather as supportive of a peace process that is already in place.

6 Federal Foreign Office (Germany): *Shaping stabilisation: Foreign and security policy concept for an integrated action for peace* (Berlin 2022), p 13.

7 Interpeace/ Bennett, Will; Vinci, Riccardo; Young, David: *Challenges to the Stabilisation Landscape: the Case for Rethinking Stability* (November 2022), p 12.

8 European External Action Service: [EEAS/Commission services’ issues paper suggesting parameters for a concept on Stabilisation as part of the EU Integrated Approach to external conflicts and crises](#) (2017), p 3

9 Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF) / Wittkowsky, Andreas, Breuer, Sebastian: *Twenty-five years of stabilisation discourse: between Realpolitik and Normativity* (2020), p 8.

Indeed, a political agreement or legitimate political process can be seen as a precondition for stabilisation to start, and the aim of the stabilisation effort would then be to create more conducive conditions for the implementation of that agreement or political process. In other words, a stabilisation facility can be considered **during or directly after a violent phase of conflict**.

Far from aiming to perpetuate the status quo, stabilisation should be seen as aiming to create a conducive environment for change to take place. Stabilisation is undertaken **in support of change**, in the form of transitioning from a current violence-ridden reality into a different and less violent state where civilians are protected and the social contract between authorities and communities is strengthened. This can be conceived of in terms of short-term objectives for longer term peaceful development.

To summarise, the following elements are often found in conceptualisations of stabilisation, in the context of internationally supported stabilisation facilities:

- External intervention at scale, involving a broad range of diplomatic, development and security instruments (N.B. the latter may include non-ODA elements as well as ODA elements, see below).
- An intervention that takes sides, in support of an authority deemed as legitimate
- Transitory and limited in time
- Pursued during or directly after a violent phase of conflict
- In support of change; a transition from violence to less violence (short term) and durable peace (long-term)

As the bullet list indicates, stabilisation facilities are complex. Not all of these elements may be present in practice even when they are intended in theory. Some of the elements listed can be turned into preconditions for when a stabilisation facility may be considered. In particular, the phase of the conflict needs to be such that there is an opportunity for reduced violence (from a situation of relatively high levels of violence), and there needs to be an authority in place that is identified as legitimate. The actual activities and programmes included in stabilization facilities can vary widely. An example from Sida’s work can be found in Box 1.

THE RELATION BETWEEN PEACEBUILDING AND STABILISATION

We have seen that stabilisation, in its broadest sense, can be understood as almost indistinguishable from, or at least conceptually very close, to peacebuilding. But we have also seen that in other usages of the

term, what we refer to as stabilisation facilities, there are important differences between stabilisation and peacebuilding:

- Most peacebuilding does not take sides in conflict. Indeed, very often peacebuilding efforts such as mediation and facilitation of dialogue is premised on a principled approach of not taking sides in conflict. Likewise, transitional justice, usually regarded as a peacebuilding approach, seeks to hold perpetrators of International Humanitarian Law or Human Rights violations to account, regardless of what side in the conflict they belong to.
- Connected to the first point, stabilisation tends to align with a narrative of one legitimate actor facing violent non-legitimate (criminal or terrorist) opposition and the solution is about containing, combatting or suppressing that violence. Peacebuilding usually seeks to prevent, marginalise or reduce terrorism and violent extremism by addressing underlying causes.
- Stabilisation is an external comprehensive intervention in support of a particular local actor or process. Peacebuilding can be an entirely internal process or include discreet elements of external support to a locally-owned process.
- One feature of stabilisation is the broad range of instruments and type of activities that it can encompass. The funding facility for stabilisation in Iraq, for example, addresses “*electricity, health, water, education, sewerage, livelihoods, municipalities, roads and bridges, and social cohesion*” (see Box 1). Only one of those, social cohesion, is clearly part of peacebuilding.
- The term “stabilisation” is sometimes used in other fields and thematic areas than peace and security. IOM for example uses the term “community stabilisation” which they see as aiming to “*prevent, mitigate and reduce the drivers and negative effects of displacement, irregular and return migration.*”¹⁰ In other words, “community stabilisation” is primarily about migration, whereas peacebuilding as well as most definitions of stabilisation has peace and security as its primary goal. This is not to deny that, in cases where violent conflict is a driver of displacement, results in terms of peace and security is often a prerequisite for voluntary, sustainable and dignified returns.

Box 1: Funding Facility for Stabilization in Iraq, managed by UNDP, supported by Sweden:

“In mid-2015, at the request of the Government of Iraq and with the support of the Global Coalition Against Daesh, UNDP Iraq established the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) to carry out stabilization activities in areas affected by the ISIL conflict.

Working in 31 locations across the five liberated governorates – Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah Al-Din, and in nine major sectors – electricity, health, water, education, sewerage, livelihoods, municipalities, roads and bridges, and social cohesion – FFS focuses on rehabilitating public infrastructure and providing essential services to communities living in areas affected by the conflict. This includes the rehabilitation of schools and hospitals, water systems and electricity networks, providing short-term employment through public works schemes and rehabilitating damaged houses...”¹¹

SIDA SUPPORT TO STABILISATION FACILITIES

Sida has a long tradition of engaging in peacebuilding from a development perspective. This has included support to stabilisation facilities, as illustrated in the example in Box 1. Sida also has experience of working in contexts where the international community, including donor community, is involved in stabilisation efforts that Swedish international development cooperation needs to relate to in one way or the other. As an international actor, you are likely to be associated with internationally supported interventions in the contexts where you work. Therefore, some of the guiding questions outlined below will apply both in situations where Sida directly supports stabilisation and in contexts where we work alongside other actors pursuing stabilisation interventions.

It goes without saying that all Sida steering, tools and routines apply to assessing possible contributions to stabilisation facilities, not least with regards to the importance of conflict analysis and of integrating conflict sensitivity into the design, implementation and monitoring. In that sense, stabilisation is no different from any other type of contribution. But experience indicates that some questions are particularly important in relation to stabilisation facilities in strategy cycle and contribution management:

An assessment of ODA eligibility is likely to be called for, and should be undertaken early on in any assessment. Stabilisation facilities may contain some elements that are not ODA eligible and these cannot be supported by Sida.¹²

Contexts where stabilisation facilities are under consideration are typically contexts in which humanitarian, development and peace initiatives are needed and most probably also already present. This means

¹⁰ The quoted definition is from IOM web page: [Community Stabilization | International Organization for Migration \(iom.int\)](https://www.iom.int/community-stabilization), accessed on September 11 2024.

¹¹ Quote from UNDP transparency portal, [Funding Facility for Stabilization | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](https://www.undp.org/transparency) (accessed on July 31 2024)

¹² If in doubt about ODA eligibility, please consult the Statistical Handbook. You may also refer to OECD's web page for [ODA Casebook on Conflict, Peace and Security Activities](https://www.oecd.org/country/casebook-on-conflict-peace-and-security-activities).

that these are contexts in which the OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian – Development – Peace nexus apply.¹³ DAC countries, as well as EU and many UN organisations are committed to implementing the Recommendation.¹⁴ Donor coordination to support stabilisation needs to be aligned with the HDP nexus approach in such contexts.¹⁵ This approach includes ensuring that respect for humanitarian principles is upheld and protecting humanitarian space. As inherently political initiatives, which amount to taking sides in a conflict, stabilisation efforts may have an impact on how the wider aid community is seen by conflict parties, potentially putting aid organizations' safety and access to communities in need at risk. See Box 2.

Box 2. Quote from the DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus:

"Utilise political engagement and other tools, instruments and approaches at all levels to prevent crises, resolve conflicts and build peace, by:

... Striving to ensure that diplomatic, stabilisation and civilian security interventions are joined-up and coherent with humanitarian, development and peace outcomes, while respecting humanitarian principles and ensuring humanitarian access to people in need is protected..."¹⁶

Excerpt from paragraph 3 of the OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus

Complex at-scale interventions, with many different kind of actors involved, are extremely difficult, especially in fragile and conflict settings, and there are evaluations that caution against over-optimism about what they can achieve.¹⁷ As always, objectives need to be clear and Theories of Change realistic. If such clarity and realism is not there, alternative approaches may need to be explored.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The list below contains a list of guiding questions that Sida's programme managers can make use of when considering, and/or working to support stabilisation. The list of questions is by no means exhaustive. Also, not all questions are equally relevant to all conceptualisations of stabilisation or all types of contexts. The questions may be used both to understand if the design of a stabilisation facility is appropriate, and if it is appropriate for Sida to fund such a facility. They may therefore be of use in external dialogue with partners and other donors, and internally in Sida's contribution appraisal and management process.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS:

- Does the stabilisation effort build on a good understanding of the context of conflict including what is needed in the specific context in order prevent or reduce violence, strengthen security, protection of civilians and increase the prospects for durable peace?
- Is there momentum in the context for reduced levels of violence and opportunity for more peace and security, and would a stabilisation effort facilitate moving forward on that momentum/opportunity? Could another type of intervention produce better results in this regard?
- Who are perceived as legitimate actors and by whom? (By the international community or parts of it, by certain national / local actors, by certain segments of the population, or by a majority of the population?)
- Who are the main perpetrators of violence, including and specifically with regards to violence against civilians?
- Whose perspective and views have informed the context analysis?
- Is the conflict or political crisis, that the stabilisation effort is supposed to address, primarily seen as a conflict between two or more parties, or as a matter of law and order, and by whom?

HUMANITARIAN – DEVELOPMENT – PEACE NEXUS:

- Does the stabilisation effort contribute to, or undermine (perhaps side-step), an appropriate HDP nexus approach in the given context?
- Have humanitarian, development and peace actors been engaged in dialogue about stabilisation and how these efforts may affect the upholding of humanitarian principles?

POLITICAL POSITIONING / TAKING SIDES:

- In cases where the stabilisation effort supports one party in an armed conflict, has the decision to take sides in conflict been taken at the appropriate political level?

¹³ Please refer to DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian – Development – Peace nexus (2019), [OECD Legal Instruments](#) and, for Sida staff, see also Sida's internal guidance for the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus (2020)

¹⁴ The recommendation as well as an updated list of adherents to it can be found here: [OECD Legal Instruments](#)

¹⁵ An HDP nexus approach builds on a context analysis that includes strong conflict analysis elements. This analysis is ideally developed by and discussed among humanitarian, development and peace actors to form the basis for a joined-up coherent effort to reduce humanitarian need, combat poverty and support peace while adhering to the principle of "Leaving No One Behind". See also [Understanding the peace dimension of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus - A Technical Note \(sida.se\)](#)

¹⁶ Excerpt from paragraph 3 of the OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus

¹⁷ A systemic review of three cases (Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan) found that aid to stabilization in these kind of settings is not effective. That same review also strongly recommends that more attention should be paid to unintended negative consequences of such undertakings. UNU-Wider Working Paper/ Zürcher; Christoph: Evidence on aid (in)effectiveness in highly fragile states: A synthesis of three systematic reviews of aid to Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan, 2008–21 (2022), p 13, 23.

- In whose interests is the stabilisation effort primarily undertaken (donor country, partner country, specific actors or communities within the partner country or other?)
- To whose political project does the stabilisation intervention lend its support and what are the likely benefits and possible risks of doing that?
- How broad and inclusive is the political buy-in or ownership locally?

OBJECTIVES AND THEORY OF CHANGE (TOC):

- Are the short-term objectives of the proposed intervention realistic and achievable?
- Are the long-term objectives realistic and achievable? Will the intervention contribute to peace and security in the longer perspective?
- How will the contribution contribute to structural and transformative change for the better, especially for people living in poverty?

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS:

- Who are the main perpetrators of violence against civilians and what and how much of that violence could the stabilisation effort realistically help reduce?
- Is protection of civilians a strong component and likely outcome of the stabilisation effort?
- What are the risks in terms of protection of civilians? Is there a risk that the intervention contributes to unintended harm towards civilians or legitimising harm done to civilians?

HUMAN RIGHTS DUE DILIGENCE:

- How is human rights and International Humanitarian Law due diligence managed in planning, implementation and follow-up?
- See [Human Rights Based Approach and Peacebuilding \(sida.se\)](#)

CONFLICT SENSITIVE APPROACH, STRATEGIC LEVEL:

- What is Sweden's position and role vis-à-vis the conflict? Taking sides or as third party to the conflict? What is the perception locally?
- What is the level of awareness about consequences in terms of what we can and cannot do? Including how it may influence other things we do already on the ground, such as other development cooperation and humanitarian efforts
- See [Integrated conflict perspective in the strategy cycle– Technical Note \(sida.se\)](#)

CONFLICT SENSITIVE APPROACH, CONTRIBUTION LEVEL:

- A conflict sensitive approach is crucial for durable stabilisation to succeed. A thorough effort should be made to ensure such an approach.
- See [Integrated conflict perspective in contribution management– Technical Note \(sida.se\)](#)

GENDER EQUALITY MAINSTREAMING:

- Is the stabilisation effort likely to support or undermine making progress on tackling harmful gender norms?

RISK ASSESSMENT:

- The political risks in international stabilisation efforts are usually high. Have they been weighed against the potential gain in terms of what the effort plans to achieve and likelihood of achieving them?
- Does the risk level correspond to relevant stakeholders' risk appetite?

EXIT STRATEGY:

- Stabilisation efforts are supposed to be of limited duration. What is the exit strategy of the stabilisation effort? How does it ensure sustainability?

OWNERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY:

- Is there local ownership for the effort and for carrying forward the results from the effort? If so, whose ownership and how broad and sustainable is it?

ODA:

- Are all elements of the initiative ODA eligible?
- If not, is the ODA element clearly separated from the non-ODA part?

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Global Public Policy Institute / Rotmann, Philipp; Watson, Abi: *Close the Gap: How to Leverage Local Analysis for Stabilization and Peacebuilding* (2023)

Interpeace / Bennet, Will; Vinci, Riccardo; Young, David: *Challenges to the Stabilisation Landscape: the Case for Rethinking Stability* (2022)

Non-paper on EU Stabilisation Concept.¹⁸

Saferworld briefing: *No Shortcuts to Security: Learning from Responses to Armed Conflict involving Proscribed Groups* (2022)

Saferworld: Attree, Larry; Watson, Abigail: *How guns fall silent: Analysing examples of relative success in integrated stabilisation* (2022)

Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF) / Wittkowsky, Andreas, Breuer, Sebastian: *Twenty-five years of stabilisation discourse: between Realpolitik and Normativity* (2020)

18 The Non-paper has been listed publicly, see [pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu), but not publicized on the web.

SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY

Visiting address: Rissneleden 110, 174 57 Sundbyberg
Postal address: Box 2025, SE-174 02 Sundbyberg, Sweden
Telephone: +46 (0)8-698 50 00. Telefax: +46 (0)8-20 88 64
E-mail: sida@sida.se Web: sida.se/en

