



Stabilisation in the Lake Chad Basin

A Humanitarian Perspective

The international community, donors and governments attending the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region must draw clear lines to distinguish humanitarian aid from the political and military elements of stabilisation, and reaffirm commitments to meet humanitarian needs and ensure the protection of civilians.

Background

The crisis in the Lake Chad Basin has entered its eighth year, with nearly 11 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. An estimated 2.4 million people are still displaced. As the crisis has become increasingly protracted, the states in the region and the international community have begun to adopt and implement stabilisation approaches that aim to defeat non-state armed groups, but also address urgent humanitarian needs and promote development and peace.

While a coordinated approach is essential to responding to complex emergencies of this nature, interviews conducted with a wide variety of actors in Nigeria and Cameroon make it clear that stabilisation interventions can have serious repercussions for humanitarian space and the protection of the population.¹ Risks include a potential blurring between stabilisation and the humanitarian-development nexus, and the

instrumentalisation of civilians and humanitarian aid to achieve stabilisation goals.

Stabilisation and Humanitarian Space

The goal of humanitarian aid is to provide life-saving assistance to people in need, impartially, neutrally, and independently. Humanitarians do so within a framework based on international humanitarian and human rights law. While there is no single definition of stabilisation, most approaches at their core describe a response to instability or fragility with the goal of re-establishing the functions and authority of a legitimate state. Strategies to do so may include many elements, from security and political interventions to peace-building and development efforts. This often will include efforts

¹ Interviews were conducted over a two-week period in June 2018 with a variety of actors in Nigeria and Cameroon including government officials, UN staff,

diplomatic representatives, donors and humanitarian agencies to assess the impact of stabilisation on humanitarian aid.

to meet the basic needs of the population, whether through re-establishing state-provided services or even distribution of humanitarian assistance.²

However, unlike principled humanitarian interventions, a stabilisation framework does not require that such services or assistance be provided impartially, neutrally, on the sole basis of need and according to vulnerability, or in respect of international humanitarian standards. Indeed, considering that stabilisation initiatives often proceed according to geographic areas and political considerations, where the key criteria for intervention relates to the context, “need” and “vulnerability” alone will not be the driving factors for determining where, and thus for whom, services and aid will be delivered.

While humanitarian action and certain stabilisation activities may at times be similar on the ground where they intersect to meet the needs of a suffering population, their frameworks and ultimate objectives are fundamentally different. It is therefore imperative to find ways of working that allow all actors to share space, ensuring principled humanitarian action and protecting rights while promoting stability.

Stabilisation and Risks for Humanitarian Action in the Lake Chad Basin

As authorities have made progress in reclaiming territory from non-state actors in the Lake Chad Basin, there has been an increasing focus on the need to stabilise these areas. In Nigeria, the government launched the “Buhari Plan” in 2016, aimed at “returning the region to normalcy”, with initiatives across emergency assistance, stabilisation and early recovery. Internationally, the Consultative Group on Prevention and Stabilisation was formed. At the regional level, the African Union and Lake Chad Basin Commission held a conference on regional stabilisation in November 2017 and commissioned the development of a strategy.

With these multiple stabilisation efforts come challenges, and potential risks from a humanitarian

perspective. Firstly, within the wider framework, there is the risk of “zero sum” investment in resolving the crisis in the region. As attention and resources for recovery and stabilisation increase, the humanitarian crisis is obscured and neglected. Secondly, at the level of implementation of stabilisation plans and activities, there is a risk that civilians may be instrumentalised as tools in a larger stabilisation effort rather than being regarded as its beneficiaries. **Stabilisation efforts may thus increase protection risks for the civilian population, at least in the short term.** Finally, there is the risk that humanitarian action may be instrumentalised, distorting its purpose and leaving fewer resources available to address needs that exist outside a stabilisation framework.

Failing to Recognise and Prioritise Humanitarian Needs

While in principle most actors acknowledge the continuing humanitarian needs in the Lake Chad region, the national and international narratives regarding the crisis have shifted to portray it largely as a context ready for stabilisation and recovery. For example, in 2017 the Oslo Humanitarian Conference, scheduled in the first quarter of the year, successfully raised funds for the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), but the key political outcome of this humanitarian discussion was the establishment of the Consultative Group on Prevention and Stabilisation. This year, while humanitarian needs in the region remain high, the pledging event to support the 2018 HRP was postponed to September, while a regional conference of governors, supported by the Consultative Group on Prevention and Stabilisation, was moved forward much earlier.

While donors continue to support the HRP, which to date is 39.6 percent funded, there remains a risk that this shift in narrative and prioritisation will affect allocations of aid overall. It can also have an impact at the local level, if funding for the basic needs of civilians in stabilisation areas is available principally through funding sources linked to stabilisation rather than humanitarian funding.

² Rotmann, P., (2016). *Toward a Realistic and Responsible Idea of Stabilisation*. Stability: International Journal of Security

and Development. 5(1), p.5. at p 2
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.414>

Case study: “The Bama Initiative” – Returns in northeast Nigeria

Under the Buhari Plan, the Nigerian authorities launched the pilot “Bama Initiative” to reconstruct and rehabilitate Bama town, as well as Gwoza, Damasak and Dikwa in Borno State.

In December 2017, discussions began on the first wave of relocations to Bama town. Humanitarians objected at the time, noting that the area did not yet meet minimum standards for infrastructure and basic services. After discussions, the plan was put on hold.

In March 2018 the discussions resurfaced, with the Borno State authorities initiating a plan for "imminent return" of IDPs to Bama. On 2 April 2018, authorities began organised relocations of between 3,000 and 4,000 IDPs from Maiduguri. They announced that 11,000 houses and the hospital had been rebuilt, and that the town was ready for people to return. However, aid workers on the ground reported that most reconstruction was not complete, water and sanitation were absent, food was scarce, and the security situation and restrictions on movement severely limited livelihood opportunities.

Despite assertions that all conditions were in place to sustain returns, the authorities convened humanitarian organisations a day before the relocations to inform them that emergency humanitarian support was required in multiple sectors, including medical, food security, water and sanitation. A subsequent humanitarian assessment mission concluded that needs were high and that the minimum standards outlined in the February 2017 Strategy on Protection, Return and Recovery had not been met. Furthermore, an estimated 1,500 new IDPs came into Bama from surrounding villages at the same time, due to ongoing military clearing of the area.

Overall, humanitarian workers identified a number of risks that premature return could create that would not only expose civilians to threats, but could undermine the objective of stabilisation itself by creating aid dependency. Nonetheless, by August, the town had received more than 10,000 people. A report from an NGO working there described the situation as dire, with thousands of people sleeping outside and no way to meet minimum needs.

On one occasion in Nigeria, humanitarian organisations who had accepted funding for humanitarian and early recovery projects under a specific donor plan, were convened by the authorities, with the donor present, and told to reprioritise immediately their work for an area that was targeted for a stabilisation pilot. In such cases, the risk of politicisation of aid is high, and there is a risk that other areas where needs are as great or greater will be neglected.

After years of conflict, a focus on recovery for the Lake Chad Basin is understandable, and legitimate state authorities are responsible for re-establishing control of their territory and rehabilitating it. Regional cooperation as well as international support for these efforts is welcome. However, the humanitarian emergency in the Lake Chad Basin remains one of the most severe in the world. Violence has displaced an estimated 2.4 million people, including 1.7 million displaced internally in Nigeria. New displacements are still taking place,

and the conflict continues to hinder populations' ability to regain their livelihoods. In these circumstances, it is imperative that all authorities and the international community address fundamental humanitarian needs. To do so effectively, all actors must ensure adequate funding and respect for humanitarian space.

Instrumentalisation of civilians

While stabilisation efforts in theory may be intended ultimately to benefit civilians, there remains a risk that their rights, safety and dignity could be compromised while implementing such efforts. A review of UN stabilisation missions found that:

“Stabilization aims ultimately to create a secure and stable environment in which civilians are not subjected to violence; however, the strategies and tactics that support the transfer of territorial control from spoilers to legitimate authorities may increase risks to civilians in the short term.”³

³ Gorur, Aditi: *Defining Boundaries of UN Stabilization Missions*. Stimson Center, 2016.

This may also happen where the rights, well-being, safety and dignity of civilians are not sufficiently safeguarded within a stabilisation strategy. This is especially likely to the degree civilians are considered as a tool to achieve stabilisation rather than its beneficiaries (see case study, p. 3).⁴

Instrumentalisation of humanitarian

Neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity are the “foundation of humanitarian action.”⁵ These principles guide humanitarian agencies in ensuring that aid goes to those most in need, regardless of status or political considerations. It also underlies humanitarian access and safety for humanitarian workers.

Stabilisation may offer a comprehensive approach by bringing a variety of tools including military interventions, development projects, and the provision of aid under one modality. However, depending on its implementation, it may also blur the line between political, military and humanitarian actors,⁶ and risk normalising the role of security forces in peacebuilding.⁷ Such blurring poses a direct danger to NGOs who may be perceived as supporting one side in a conflict, and so become a target for the opposing group.

Many NGOs interviewed in Maiduguri expressed concern that the government viewed them as part of the stabilisation effort, not as neutral and impartial actors. The government has reacted with surprise and dismay when humanitarians in certain situations have refused to provide aid in the exact manner the government has expected or directed.

As one interviewee explained, the Nigerian authorities had assumed humanitarians would provide aid to facilitate the relocation of civilians to Bama town. When humanitarians objected on the grounds that the returns were premature, and that “any sudden demand for more aid to Bama would be impossible to meet without having to shift ongoing humanitarian aid from other locations where there are severe humanitarian needs,”⁸ the government expressed that humanitarians were not

fulfilling their role. They further reasoned that if humanitarians were providing aid to the displaced in one location, they should be able to provide the same aid, to the same population, when they were moved to their area of origin.

The disagreement over the relocation of civilians to Bama reflects one of the core challenges when humanitarian action and stabilisation efforts share space, and sometimes the same activities, while being governed by different frameworks and directed toward different goals. This may lead stabilisation actors to provide aid to further a political cause (for instance providing food aid to facilitate relocations to Bama). Meanwhile, humanitarians may refuse to provide that aid themselves because it would violate humanitarian principles, or facilitate a return that may not be safe and voluntary.

Where humanitarians are pressured to respond – either by authorities or simply by the emerging needs created – it raises the risk that humanitarians will become complicit in a process that may violate the rights of civilians and expose them to harm.

Stabilisation and the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

The humanitarian-development nexus (the “nexus”) is about meeting immediate humanitarian needs whilst strengthening community resilience and preparedness, and contributing to sustainable development. As noted above, stabilisation may also have these objectives, but within the ultimate aim to re-establish the functions and authority of a legitimate state. While the activities taken forward under a nexus approach, or under stabilisation, may overlap on the ground, the difference in framework matters. Recovery, resilience and peacebuilding can take place anywhere practitioners can safely reach. By contrast, stabilisation efforts, by definition, occur on territory controlled by state authorities or their proxies.

⁴ See also *Not Ready to Return: IDP Movement Intentions in North-Eastern Nigeria* (NRC September 2017) <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/nigeria-not-ready-to-return-report-summary.pdf>.

⁵ Jan Egeland, *Principles Under Pressure; the impact of counterterrorism measures and preventing/countering violent extremism on principled humanitarian action*, NRC position paper, 2018, at p.7.

⁶ Mac Ginty, R. *Against Stabilization Stability*: International Journal of Security & Development ISSN: 2165-2627 (1 November 2012) at p.23.

⁷ Mac Ginty at p.27.

⁸ The Nigerian INGO Forum issued a public statement on behalf of its members detailing their concerns: <http://ingoforum.ng/nigeria-ingo-forum-public-statement-on-relocation-of-idps-to-bama/>.

In geographic locations where nexus activities and stabilisation initiatives overlap, it is important to foster closer coordination amongst all relevant actors. However, if the nexus is made subordinate to a stabilisation strategy, aid becomes politicised rather than remaining focused on “ending needs by reducing risks and vulnerabilities”.⁹

In practice, these divisions and overlaps are more difficult to parse. Interviews in Nigeria and Cameroon reflected confusion among donors and field practitioners, many of whom considered the nexus and stabilisation to be interchangeable terms, or simply new words to describe the same way of operating. Others suggested that if there had been a difference before, it was now “mixed together all into the same thing.” This confusion seems to be exacerbated by discussions of the ‘triple nexus’ where practitioners struggle to include peace in traditional aid programs without compromising principles.

The lack of clarity also pervades funding applications. Humanitarian actors interviewed were often unaware of the difference between stabilisation and other funding sources, and tended to apply for grants which could support their programs without necessarily being aware of the background and objectives of the funding stream. If there is a shortfall in traditional humanitarian funds, some actors may increasingly look to stabilisation funds to meet the response gaps, without evaluating the implications. Stabilisation funding directed towards the geographic and political priorities of donors risks undermining the needs-based approach.

In Lake Chad, an overemphasis on stabilisation could stifle the room for a genuine transition from a humanitarian to a development response, and consequently fail to support durable solutions. Both donors and humanitarian agencies therefore need to take clear positions on the purpose of funding and the frameworks under which they belong.

Berlin Conference: Prioritise Protection in the Lake Chad Basin

After the promotion of the stabilisation agenda at the Oslo conference, the Berlin Conference offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the successes and shortcomings of the approach. Despite some progress, humanitarian needs and protection concerns in the Lake Chad Basin remain widespread. Given the extent of the crisis, substantial humanitarian aid will still be required for the near future. As stabilisation strategies and initiatives are implemented, it is crucial that conference participants commit to ensuring that the rights of civilians will be protected, any potential harm to civilians from stabilisation activities will be reduced or eliminated, and humanitarian space will be respected.

The Berlin Conference is also a key moment to clarify how the nexus will be implemented, and how it can run in parallel with stabilisation while preserving its people-centred goals and rights-based frameworks. **Stabilisation must not become synonymous with the use of humanitarian aid for political ends.**

⁹ Edward Kallon, UNDP Resident Representative for Nigeria. *Germany and UNDP join forces for Integrated Regional Stabilization of the Lake Chad Basin region*. UNDP press release 15 November 2017, accessed at

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2017/l-allemande-et-le-pnud-unissent-leurs-forces-pour-la-stabilisati.html>

NRC Recommendations

Recommendations to States

- **Civilians must never be instrumentalised to achieve stabilisation objectives.** Human security and protection should be at the core of planning and executing stabilisation activities. This includes ensuring that security operations respect the obligation to protect the lives, safety and dignity of civilians.
- **Any organised relocation or movement of internally displaced persons must be voluntary, informed, and based on a free choice,** in line with obligations under the Kampala Convention. Where stabilisation aims to include the return of civilians, this must be planned as a durable outcome of successful recovery, rather than a means to achieving it.
- **States must commit to respecting the independence and neutrality of humanitarian action, including in areas designated for stabilisation.**

Recommendations to Donors

- The humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin remains acute. **Donors must keep humanitarian needs centre-stage and commit to funding the remaining 60 percent shortfall** of the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan.
- **Donors should make a clear distinction between stabilisation, development and humanitarian funds,** and take steps to ensure that the appropriate funding is available to address humanitarian needs in a principled fashion.

Recommendations to the UN, Humanitarian and Development Actors

- **UN leadership in country should speak out boldly wherever stabilisation threatens to impede principled humanitarian action.** The UN should work to ensure that host governments, and their security forces, understand the independent role of humanitarian workers, while also communicating to humanitarians the stabilisation strategy of the government.
- The UN should take the lead in ensuring effective coordination amongst all actors that promotes respect for diverse roles and mandates while facilitating shared operational space.
- **Humanitarians and development actors must work to better understand their role in stabilisation contexts and to clarify their internal operating procedures to maintain adherence to humanitarian principles.** Greater political awareness of the stabilisation agenda would facilitate their ability to maintain neutrality and independence also when undertaking projects in stabilisation contexts.

Links to other relevant information:

[Principles Under Pressure: The Impact of Counterterrorism Measures and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism on Principled Humanitarian Action](#) (NRC 2018)

[Not Ready to Return: IDP Movement Intentions in North-Eastern Nigeria](#) (NRC 2017)

Contact: Per Byman: info@nrc-hilft.de; Mathew Truscott: mathew.truscott@nrc.no