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Community Stabilization –
An approach for facilitating
progress towards durable solutions
and operationalizing the
Humanitarian–Development–Peace
Nexus: Lessons from Zimbabwe,
Ethiopia and Somalia

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Introduction

By 2019, violent conflict and persecution had forced more than 70 million people to flee their homes (OCHA, 2020), both within and across international borders, consuming 80 per cent of global humanitarian aid budgets (UNHCR, 2019). An estimated 50.8 million people had been displaced internally at the end of 2019, 45.7 million of them by violent conflict (IDMC, 2019). Internal displacement situations are becoming more protracted, with an average duration of 18 years (Brandt et al., 2017), during which time many remain in acutely vulnerable situations, dependent on externally driven humanitarian aid.

In 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit, States and the international community committed to move beyond responding to humanitarian needs to ending these needs, by reducing vulnerabilities and risks (OCHA, 2016a, 2016b). This would be achieved by strengthening complementary collaboration and coordination between humanitarian aid and development assistance, to facilitate the transition towards sustainable recovery, self-reliance and resilience to destabilizing factors in the future. More recently, the importance of restoring and sustaining peace, particularly in the context of violent conflict, has been recognized as a key component of transition away from crisis (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2017). The safe and peaceful coexistence of populations is a prerequisite for embarking on sustainable recovery and development pathways, including the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.). The Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus (HDPN) is the conceptual and policy framework that combines these traditionally distinct approaches (OECD, 2020). However, more work is needed to move beyond the conceptual dimensions of HDPN and focus on how to operationalize its principles in practice.

With respect to displaced populations, according to the durable solutions framework, displacement ends when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement, and can enjoy their human rights without being discriminated against on account of their displacement (Brookings Institution and University of Bern, 2010). The framework identifies the following eight conditions to be attained for a durable solution to be achieved: long-term safety, security and freedom of movement; an adequate standard of living; access to employment and livelihoods; restoration of housing land and property; access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs; and access to effective legal remedies and justice. However, in a growing number of displacement-affected contexts, the attainment of all eight conditions remains a challenge long after the emergency phase of a given crisis has passed.

In these circumstances, the community stabilization approach can play a catalytic, foundational role in transitioning away from humanitarian crises and laying the ground for attaining durable solutions, even when circumstances are not yet conducive to such. While coercive approaches to restore stability remain an important component in the international community to address humanitarian crises or conflict, as a non-coercive approach, community stabilization is increasingly recognized as important complement to security-related interventions. As such, community stabilization is one approach to operationalizing the HDPN, by providing a critical bridge between dependence on humanitarian aid and embarking on development pathways.

This paper begins with a focus on the multidimensional destabilizing impacts of displacement crises, the factors that limit opportunities for communities to transition away from acute vulnerability and aid dependence, and defines the CS approach as a means to overcome these challenges. Community stabilization core programming principles are then presented, framed through a community-based planning (CBP) methodology – a practical, community-driven, local government-led process intended to support the transition of impacted communities away from displacement crises through improved stability – drawing on examples of displacement from Zimbabwe, Somalia and Ethiopia.

The multidimensional impacts of crises and the community stabilization approach

The impacts of displacement crises, whether human-induced, environmental, or a combination of the two, can be diverse, complex and catastrophic on the lives of affected populations, dislocating people from their homes, livelihoods and communities. They include the physical, visible impacts such as damage to housing and public infrastructure, injury and death. They also include the less visible impacts or factors that might, in some instances, have led to the displacement in the first place, such as inter- or intracommunal tensions over scarce resources; marginalization of different social ethnic or religious groups; insecurity; exploitation, including of displaced persons; and criminal or rent-seeking power structures.

Transitioning out of the immediate, emergency phase of displacement crises, while positive, in most cases reveals deeper, more complex and lasting impacts on the stability of affected areas. Although the character and severity of these impacts on stability can differ significantly between respective countries and contexts,¹ and are influenced by pre-existing levels of instability, displacement crises can weaken or eradicate the social, physical, political, cultural, economic, judicial and security structures and systems required for societies and communities to function. If left unaddressed, multidimensional instability can result in the emergence or re-emergence of violence, humanitarian crises and displacement. Community stabilization is primarily focused on preventing this from occurring and laying the foundations for longer-term recovery (see Government of France, 2019).

Textbox 1: Relocation fails when displaced groups conflict with existing communities – Malawi 2015

Following a flood-related displacement in Malawi in 2015, internally displaced persons (IDPs) were relocated to a safer area within the flood-prone Shire Valley, through the provision of shelter and basic services. Two years later, however, the IDPs had returned to the flood-prone area predominantly due to conflict with existing residents at the relocation site. In the absence of support to strengthen the relationship with existing residents and address grievances between IDPs and receiving communities, the “solution” for flood-related IDPs proved not to be durable (IOM, 2016).

In practice, improving stability in crisis contexts requires a broad range of interventions from diverse actors, including communities, civil society, governments and international organizations. On one hand, drivers of instability, such as the incursions or activities of violent groups, often require coercive approaches such as enforcing basic security by undertaking military/peacekeeping operations or actions by border management authorities to prevent transnational threats from spreading across borders and causing further harm and displacement.² Across the international community, coercive approaches to restore stability remain an important component within a range of supports to States affected by humanitarian crises or conflict (see Federal Government of Germany, 2018). However, numerous examples highlight where this has either been ineffective, or in some cases has exacerbated instability.³ In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, where more than 3 million people have been displaced by conflict, years of military interventions against armed groups to restore stability have had limited success (Finnbakk, 2019:18; De Vries, 2016).

¹ For example, the return of displaced ethnic Tamils to northern Sri Lanka in 2009 was followed by a relatively rapid restoration of services and livelihoods, while issues related to reparations remain more than a decade later. South Sudan, by contrast, has made significantly less progress towards resolving displacement.

² Enforcing basic security includes both law enforcement and military support, recognizing that there are important distinctions between the two.

³ Iraq and Afghanistan provide examples of cases where top-down military-led interventions have undermined local legitimacy (Barakat and Milton, 2020:2).

On the other hand, addressing the drivers of instability can be achieved through non-coercive approaches by establishing mechanisms and initiating processes of positive change that will address destabilizing factors at local levels, such as unresolved grievances, tensions over resources, economic and political marginalization, ineffective and unequitable service delivery, or lack of inclusive livelihood opportunities.

In displacement crises, depending on the circumstances, both coercive and non-coercive approaches to restore stability can play a necessary role in preventing recurrent crises and establishing foundations for recovery. There is a growing recognition of the importance of non-coercive approaches per se, as well as of the complementarity they can have with more security-related interventions (see Federal Government of Germany, 2018; Government of France, 2019; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; UK DFID, 2019; United States Department of State et al., 2018).

Owing to the range of interventions deployed to improve stability across the coercive–non-coercive continuum, the concept of stabilization lacks a single definition (see Federal Government of Germany, 2018; Government of France, 2019; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; UK DFID, 2019; Brechenmacher, 2019). To an extent, the inclusion in the discourse of more securitized or coercive approaches and political transitions has negatively influenced perceptions within the humanitarian community, in that stabilization approaches conflict with humanitarian principles.⁴ Although beyond the scope of this paper, arguably some forms of non-coercive stabilization can be entirely complementary to humanitarian action, through strengthening the protection environment (IASC, 2016), as well as playing a catalytic role in the transition towards durable solutions.

This paper focuses on an approach entitled community stabilization as part of the latter, non-coercive modalities, intended to establish mechanisms and systems, or to change attitudes and behaviour, and provide resources to address different dimensions and drivers of instability. The approach serves the dual purpose of mitigating the likelihood of (re)emergent crises and further displacement, supporting early recovery and laying foundations conducive to long-term development, as well as building resilience at community levels towards destabilizing influences in future.

The following common characteristics can help to explain what the community stabilization approach is and what it is not. First, the focus of the community stabilization approach is on improving stability at local levels, where the impacts of displacement crises are most acutely felt and where stability gains can have the most rapid and greatest impact.

This notwithstanding, the community stabilization approach is aware of, contributes to, and/or benefits from national or regional initiatives intended to improve macrolevel stability, such as peace agreements or political transitions. Indeed, effective community stabilization approaches are locally focused and driven, but should be intrinsically linked to national initiatives and are far less effective in their absence.

Second, the level of instability in a given context dictates not only the priorities, but also the community stabilization approach modality. In highly volatile environments, where the risk of re-emergent conflict or displacement remains high, the community stabilization approach prioritizes short-term, targeted interventions to prevent such negative outcomes as a primary objective. By contrast, contexts exposed to longer-term destabilizing factors, and facing a lower level of risk of imminent violent conflict and displacement, allow for more structured engagement. In summary, all contexts are different; the community stabilization approach is not a blueprint; and the most

⁴ Marc DuBois addresses this issue with respect to the broader HDPN (DuBois, 2020).

effective interventions respond to carefully evaluated, often evolving realities on the ground. Several countries have or are in the process of developing localized stability indices as a basis for tailoring interventions across the stability–instability spectrum.⁵

Third, the community stabilization approach is not only focused on soft programming, such as resolving grievances, strengthening social cohesion or restoring trust in local leadership. In a majority of contexts, populations impacted by displacement crises have tangible or visible recovery needs, whether these be infrastructural, economic, or service-related. While the community stabilization approach contributes to recovery from humanitarian crises through addressing these tangible needs, the emphasis is on fostering improvements in levels of stability as the overarching basis for intervention. The process – for example, utilizing labour-intensive community-based construction approaches, rather than outsourcing to a contractor, or using participatory and inclusive context analysis and planning, rather than externally driven assessments – is as important, in contributing to improving stability at local levels, as the product or tangible deliverables. While the community stabilization approach has many commonalities with other forms of postcrisis approaches, such as early recovery (Global Cluster for Early Recovery, n.d.), the emphasis on improving stability, as evidenced in the case studies below, is an important difference.

Similarly, the community stabilization approach can be a form of peacebuilding, through, for example, supporting local level reconciliation or intercommunity cohesion; however, the emphasis of community stabilization is on the proximate, immediate threats to stability, often in a rapidly evolving environment, and the approach does not intend to focus on long-term processes necessary to prevent or resolve underlying “root causes” of conflict at multiple levels.

Core programming principles of the community stabilization approach

This section draws predominantly, but not exclusively, on the community-based planning (CBP) methodology to illustrate how the community stabilization approach is implemented in practice, through the application of core programming principles. CBP is a structured, but adaptable community-driven process encompassing participatory and inclusive assessment, analysis, planning, prioritization, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. While CBP is not an entirely new approach, originating in the community development movements during the 1970s,⁶ in displacement crisis settings the same key components are adapted to incorporate flexibility and shorter implementation time frames, reflecting rapidly evolving or unstable environments.

Community-owned

“I’m not happy because I now have a school to send my children, I’m happy because I sat with my brothers and sisters under that tree, decided we needed a school, then we organized ourselves, and built the school with our own hands. I moulded the bricks.”

Relocated IDP woman, Mount Darwin, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe 2013

⁵ E.g. the United Nations Fragility Index and Maturity Model, developed in Somalia in 2017.

⁶ A broad range of approaches falls under the term “community development”, including Participatory Rural Appraisal and Rapid Rural Appraisal (see Chambers, 1983).

Fundamentally, community stabilization approaches succeed when communities are empowered and have the agency and ownership to drive positive change. Communities are engaged from the outset to define, prioritize and realize interventions to address the collective needs that they have jointly identified.

The community stabilization approach considers populations in target areas, including women, men, female and male youth, and local authorities, as active participants who can articulate their challenges, opportunities and threats in their own terms and be empowered to address these issues. In displacement crisis contexts, giving a voice to different population groups, in a safe environment, can be the first step towards improving stability and addressing tensions or grievances. The community stabilization approach is more than simply consulting with communities about their needs; it is about embedding ownership and responsibility from the outset.

In order to ensure the ownership of the participants, the CBP approach requires that all participants in the process contribute in some way, with external actors complementing through funding, as illustrated in the example in textbox 2 below.

Textbox 2: Restoring/strengthening capacities for peaceful coexistence in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, two communities in Buhera District, Manicaland Province, were displaced following a violent land dispute, which subsequently became politicized during a period of national instability in 2008. One of the community groups had their land and homes forcibly misappropriated, causing livelihoods to collapse and requiring children either to drop out or to walk 8 km to an alternative school. Tensions remained over the months that followed, with frequent clashes and reprisal attacks, including the slaughter of cattle and burning of houses.

Community-based planning was introduced to restore stability and capacities for peaceful coexistence, through a community-wide assessment, planning and community-driven recovery process. Key stages in the process included forming representative socioeconomic groups (such as traders, single-headed households, elderly and the youth); mapping of past events, both positive and negative; and a situational analysis and visioning process, aimed at attaining a common goal for recovery, peace and development. The identification of “peace actors” in the community, such as women leaders and elders, and their participation in the process, was key to establishing a basis for intercommunal engagement. The community groups also agreed on the roles, responsibilities and contributions of community members in the identified projects. In this regard, the CBP process established the foundations for stability in the affected ward.

A key community-defined priority was the construction of a local clinic. In line with the shared vision established during the planning process, community members provided all locally available materials, as well as skilled and unskilled labour for the construction of the clinic. Even members of the Apostolic Faith religion, who do not believe in modern medical treatment, contributed materials and participated as bricklayers in the construction of the clinic, demonstrating a clear commitment to the objectives of the project and restoring peace.

The community stabilization approach, such as the one used in Buhera, needs to carefully evaluate the importance of the community contributions, both in time and resources vis-à-vis placing additional stress on vulnerable populations that may retain humanitarian needs. On one hand, community contributions can promote ownership and can take the form of low-cost resources, such as local building materials, time, local produce and skills. On the other, processes such as CBP take populations away from engaging in other coping mechanisms or means of income generation. A common middle ground has been to incorporate “cash-for-work”, but this must be evaluated against its potentially negative impact on ownership and sustainability, as populations

will still be receiving “assistance” rather than driving recovery. Furthermore, CBP in unstable contexts needs to be short, with planning processes spanning a maximum of three to five days, in contrast with longer-term traditional community development approaches. Generally speaking, there is evidence that the success of community stabilization interventions correlates with the level of community contribution.

For the purpose of this paper, “community” is defined as a number of persons who regularly interact with one another, within a specific geographical territory, and who tend to share common values, beliefs and attitudes, for example, at municipality, village or district levels (IOM, 2019). Concretely, the most effective community stabilization programmes intervene in populations of no more than 10,000 people, and the impact typically decreases as the population size increases.⁷ In crisis contexts, where systems and structures have been weakened or have disappeared, the community can be the most coherent programming unit, beyond individuals and households predominantly targeted through emergency interventions, and this brings into focus the importance of having impact at a population group level to maximize stability dividends.

Through this definition, however, the community stabilization approach gives central importance to the heterogeneity of communities and proactively seeks to include all segments of society, including the most marginalized. In Buhera, the exercise outlined in textbox 3 below, which has been incorporated into CBP processes in different countries, was used to create a community profile, as well as to identify different dimensions of vulnerability and marginalization.

Textbox 3: Participatory community profiling in Zimbabwe

Five glasses were placed on a tray, three the right way up, one laid on its side and the other upside down. One of the upright glasses was full, the other half full and the third was empty. The individual was asked to pour water in all three glasses, despite one of them being full (and therefore overflowing). For the remaining two, upside down and lying on its side, the individual was asked to fill them without touching them – which is impossible. The community was then asked to compare this scenario with different socioeconomic groups or individuals within the community, in order to initiate the process of identifying the different circumstances of community members and groups, including strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and risks.

While the aim of CBP overall was to improve stability in the displacement-affected communities, groups included people who were not directly impacted by displacement, such as elders, political activists, farmers, traders, people living with HIV and others.

The exercise in textbox 3 is useful and important for helping different socioeconomic groups to understand that needs, opportunities and capacities vary across the community, using universally understood needs and resources: water and glasses. Central to the community stabilization approach is to avoid providing assistance based on status, such as being an IDP or returnee. Instead, it is through CBP that collective needs across all groups, including displaced persons, are prioritized and addressed.

However, while the above activity can be useful in addressing contentious issues through uncontentious symbols (water and glasses), it is not a guarantee for success, particularly when divisions or intracommunal grievances are deeply entrenched. In communities experiencing chronic social instability, unearthing conflicts, marginalization or divisions also creates the risk that highlighting heterogeneity, divisions and different community groups will have a destabilizing impact. These risks, however, need to be assessed against the alternatives, such as status-based, household level or supply-driven assistance that can exacerbate tensions through perceived

⁷ This estimate of 10,000 people mostly reflects the field experience of the authors.

favourable treatment of certain groups, or that can leave problems simmering only to resurface later. As is often the case, well-trained and context-sensitive facilitation is critical, and there are no guarantees.

In reality, it is important to balance the conditions needed for integration, at community levels, with the conditions needed for communities to coexist peacefully and resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. The latter situation is often the most realistic expectation. The distinction between bonding and bridging can be useful to distinguish between these situations, the former describing strengthened integration and the latter identifying the factors that establish connections between different socioeconomic groups. Both approaches are useful and are not mutually dependent for improving levels of stability. The important point is to pursue opportunities for cooperation across different community groups, and CBP actively promotes this.

In practice, once the initial planning process of CBP is complete, representatives from different socioeconomic groups in the community are supported to form committees both for the oversight and the implementation of prioritized projects. Community-based public works is one such approach, utilizing community labour to restore public infrastructure and key basic services. The community-based public works approach mobilizes displacement-affected communities, with participation from different population groups, to take responsibility to drive their own recovery processes. Furthermore, the approach can be utilized with certain marginalized population groups, such as IDPs or former combatants, to present them in a positive light to their communities as contributing to the public good, thereby facilitating their integration process in cases where they are unable to return. A distinguishing characteristic of the community stabilization approach is that it avoids handouts, and minimizes external contractor-driven reconstruction.⁸ This is because the primary objective of community stabilization is stability, more so than recovery; how the activities are implemented, to foster collaborative partnerships, is as important as what they produce.

⁸ For some public infrastructure, technical support is necessary; however, a best practice in the community stabilization approach is to contract engineers as site supervisors, rather than contracting entire construction firms.

Textbox 4: Reintegration of returnees and local integration of IDPs in Kismayo, Somalia

In 2015, the port town of Kismayo experienced both the mass influx of refugee returns following the planned closure of Dadaab refugee camp, as well as new drought- and conflict-affected IDPs joining an existing protracted case load. After years of Al Shabaab occupation, the town retained a range of vulnerabilities and risks, from economic, social, security and protection perspectives. Populations in Kismayo required both humanitarian and recovery support, as well as attention to potential destabilizing factors such as competition over resources, land disputes and historical interclan rivalries, in an already fragile context.

CBP was applied as the principal approach and entry point for building social cohesion among returnees, IDPs and host communities. The process brought together various groups to jointly negotiate and prioritize projects to improve equitable access to quality basic services, infrastructure and security/protection to establish the means for peaceful coexistence. An external evaluation of the Government-led Midnimo (“Unity”) project highlighted that a key outcome of the approach was in improving levels of acceptance of the IDPs and returnees among the broader community, by increasing positive social interactions and joint identification, as well as implementation of projects providing community-wide economic and social benefits (Axiom Monitoring and Evaluation, 2019). Projects included the upgrading, rehabilitation and construction of community-prioritized schools, hospitals, water sources, markets, police stations, prisons and stadiums, benefiting 842,225 people, and using labour predominantly sourced from the local populations.

The stability dividend was therefore threefold, and derived from a combination of inclusive planning, increased social interactions through community-based public works, and reducing pressure on the availability of public infrastructure and services.

The restoration of livelihoods is also an important component within the community stabilization approach, as economic collapse or stagnation can be a significant driver of instability, particularly when distress-coping mechanisms include different forms of violence or criminality (Farrington, 2011; McLeod and Dávalos, 2008:4,8). While livelihoods are often restored through “packages” at individual or household levels, the community stabilization approach prioritizes communal livelihoods. This could include establishing cooperatives for enterprises that bring community members together to work collectively towards livelihood restoration. The approach is underpinned by a theory of change which states that community-wide collaboration and enterprises mutually benefiting different socioeconomic groups will strengthen social cohesion, both through increasing the frequency of positive or constructive interactions and through the overall economic benefit. Cooperative entrepreneurship can be combined with vocational training and seed capital, with examples including fishing or fish processing, agricultural production and marketing, trade and transport, and tailoring cooperatives or associations. The community stabilization programme in Buhera provides a good example of this (see textbox 5).

Textbox 5: Community stabilization through restoration of livelihoods – Buhera, Zimbabwe

In addition to the clinic, a second priority to emerge from the Buhera CBP process was the need to strengthen livelihoods and food security. As a result, two solar-powered irrigation schemes comprising 160 members from both communities were established. Community members once in conflict together were farming side by side.

Additional livelihood interventions such as promoting small grain cultivation, community training in general agronomy, use of community agriculture equipment such as planters, and establishment of market linkages for agricultural produce made members of both communities realize that they have more to gain through cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

In conclusion, the community stabilization approach, particularly through the CBP methodology, prioritizes supporting communities collectively to define, own and drive recovery processes, as well as proactively tackling socioeconomic exclusion. The community stabilization approach considers strengthening social cohesion as a key ingredient to improving stability and an incremental step towards resolving displacement sustainably. Whether through community-based public works or cooperative entrepreneurship, effective community stabilization interventions need to factor in how activities contribute to social cohesion, as well as the risks of exacerbating divisions through including certain community groups, while inadvertently excluding others.

Government-led

Whereas restoring horizontal linkages across the community through strengthening social cohesion is a central component in the community stabilization approach, so too is re-establishing the vertical linkages through strengthening the social contract with local leadership.

Governments have the primary responsibility to provide, inter alia, services, security, safety, justice, public infrastructure and economically conducive environments to the populations they serve. In many contexts, civil society actors and traditional leaders also play an important role in supplementing and supporting these functions.⁹

Where opportunities exist, supporting governments to be effective, transparent and accountable to the needs of communities can contribute to improved stability and establishing foundations for the pursuit of durable solutions (Barakat and Milton, 2020:2).

However, there are challenges and risks that need to be considered, including the following: first, States may have exhibited low levels of effectiveness or motivation within local government structures precrisis, with large-scale displacement shocks either exacerbating this situation or overwhelming capacities entirely. Second, in conflict settings, States are increasingly de facto or de jure associated with the conflict, posing complex dilemmas for humanitarian actors regarding humanitarian principles.¹⁰ Opportunities to improve stability through strengthening local government capacities need to be assessed against these risks and challenges. Conversely, failing to empower and capacitate local leadership can undermine the credibility of the institution that has the primary mandate to respond to the needs of IDPs (Brookings Institution and University of Bern, 2010). In conflict settings, this can even fuel the legitimacy of non-State armed groups or other forms of illegitimate leadership, and therefore promote instability.

Recognizing these limitations, local governments regaining the confidence of displacement-affected communities can be catalytic in contributing to greater levels of stability, as well as helping to close the gap that allows illegitimate actors to function. The community stabilization approach seeks to identify individuals in local leadership positions who have the motivation to drive positive change, capacitate them through skills and material support, and create public spaces for civil society–leadership interactions. Ultimately, confidence in local government is improved when civilians consider themselves to be benefiting, for example from protection or improved and equitable access to economic opportunities, or through improved access to safe water, health care or education. The community stabilization approach prioritizes all of these; creating space for dialogue, capacitating local administrations to be more effective and supporting them to provide services (see textbox 6 below).

¹⁰ Examples include Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan.

Textbox 6: Enhancing local leadership capacities to lead community stabilization processes – Kismayo, Somalia

In the case of Kismayo, supporting the capacities of municipal authorities to lead the CBP process was a crucial component in restoring stability. The town had suffered occupation by the extremist group Al Shabaab, and mistrust or fragmentation between different communities or clan-based groups remained. Local administrations were nascent, having been in office for less than three years, and the national State-formation process was progressing slowly.

Therefore, providing support through training and logistics was a key component in laying foundations for longer-term recovery and development. Although the process of engaging and supporting Government leadership was not without challenges in the early stages, as the Midnimo project progressed, the following significant benefits emerged from working in this way.

First, the local Government leadership developed community action plans (CAPs), an outcome of the CBP process, which facilitated the wider incorporation of these plans into Government-led planning and coordination processes for recovery and development, including attracting bilateral development assistance.

Second, support to enhance local government capacities included their capacities to analyse and address the root causes of existing and future conflicts, insecurities and displacement-related needs such as land tenure issues, alongside the communities that they serve.

Third, working closely with civil society enhanced understanding within Government of the negative impact of forced evictions and the positive impact that settlement or urban planning, with sufficient services, could have on fostering peaceful coexistence.

The ongoing local authority-led consultative and dialogue processes improved Government credibility and legitimacy with displacement-affected communities, as well as their capacities to manage interclan reconciliation processes through establishing dispute resolution committees during CBP.

For partners to States – such as international or national non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and donors – supporting local authorities to lead within the community stabilization approach requires visibility considerations to be revisited. Donors often have stringent visibility requirements, and implementing partners maintain their relevance in crisis contexts by being “visible” through branding and marking, for example with placards on the walls describing which donor or organization provided the service. However, if the objective of an intervention is to improve stability through restoring confidence in local administrations, it is important to evaluate the contribution of donor/partner visibility vis-à-vis the local governments, for whom being visible is a key dimension to improving confidence,¹¹ more so than the visibility of the partner.

While the Midnimo project provides a positive example, there are cases where supporting local administrations to be accountable and responsive to the needs of the population they serve has been more difficult. Attitudes can be influenced by perceptions that governments are slow, uninterested or corrupt, and experience substantiates these perceptions in some locations (Barakat and Milton, 2020). However, given the global commitments to “localization” (OCHA, 2016c) and the benefits described above, the community stabilization approach advocates for engagement and the empowerment of local actors, in this case local government administrators. The aim is to drive positive change and engage civil society to play a prominent role in crisis response, except in cases where local authorities are understood to be working against the best interests or protection of communities.

¹¹ Some donors, such as USAID, now have a contractual waiver on branding and marking for certain projects.

Engaging local authorities that are unresponsive can support them and apprise them of the benefits of being more responsive (Barakat and Milton, 2020:10). In many crisis contexts, support and advice to local leadership needs to be enhanced, enabling them to be accountable and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve, and the CBP methodology provides a useful vehicle for doing this. Capacitating local authorities can also be a form of advocacy for the application of standards and best practices.

Textbox 7: Enhancing local leadership capacities to resolve displacement – Somali Region, Ethiopia

In 2018, intercommunal violence in Ethiopia resulted in the internal displacement of approximately 1.4 million individuals (IDMC, 2019). Partners engaged with the Government to establish a national Durable Solutions Initiative (DSI), soliciting support at the highest levels in order to apply standards, coherence and political commitment to address the displacement situation. Concurrently, in the Somali Region, different departments and local administrations formed task forces from the regional state to local levels, and were supported to undertake assessment, consultation, strategic planning and coordination for resolving displacement, through local integration, relocation and return to places of displacement. This included training 51 local “Woreda” level leaders, as well as civil society organizations and community leaders, in the CBP methodology.

In Balbile Woreda, for example, following a Government-led peace and reconciliation process, members of opposing sides of the intercommunal conflict, including returning IDPs, engaged in a CBP process to plan and prioritize recovery interventions, and to lay foundations for peace through the establishment of “peace ambassadors” mainly composed of women and youths, as well as community-based reconstruction of schools, clinics and other small-scale infrastructure that was burned down. Given the long-term responsibility for sustaining peace in Balbile, the leadership of the local administration was a key component.

Context-specific, flexible and adaptable

In crisis-affected countries, the impact is rarely, if ever, homogenous across villages, even in a given district, and population groups experience the crisis differently. For community stabilization interventions to be effective, they need to have a strong conceptualization of the destabilizing factors or unstable dimensions in the target area to identify which of these issues could be addressed by the intervention. These could be localized factors, related to specific incidents, personalities, groups and predominant livelihoods, or crosscutting dimensions such as gender or age. While there are universal needs and interests, such as protection, water, education, health and livelihoods, effective community stabilization approaches will obtain sufficient levels of information and analytics to be able to tailor support to specific areas. To ensure maximum impact, programmes should be adapted to specific contexts and avoid becoming formulaic.

Within the CBP methodology, once representatives of socioeconomic groups have been identified, the next stage is to undertake a context and conflict analysis to understand, inter alia, the actors (roles, needs, interests, capacities), resources and resource-based conflicts, seasonal livelihoods, historical causes and recent drivers of conflict, as well as broader strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. At one level, the assessment is intended to understand the problem or problem sets as an evidence base for designing interventions to improve stability. In addition, however, identifying and discussing the key issues in a structured and facilitated participatory dialogue creates the necessary interactions for addressing them and forging a common understanding between different community groups. Having undertaken a participatory context and conflict analysis (inclusive of different gender- and age-defined groups), the next step in CBP is to formulate a shared vision for the future. On another, equally important level, through engaging the community and its socioeconomic groups as active participants in the process, the CBP approach to context and conflict analysis also feeds into improving stability. Participants are empowered to drive their own recovery and stabilization process, and by interacting with conflicting socioeconomic groups, they increase their mutual understanding and the realization

that they might have similar needs and interests. The overall process can, therefore, contribute to forming consensus and improving resilience and cohesion in the community.

As such, the community stabilization approach values the importance of not applying a blueprint for recovery, both because communities know best what their needs and priorities are, and because the participatory and inclusive context and conflict analysis can contribute to improving stability in its own right.

However, in some displacement crises, the CBP approach may be too structured and vested for a rapidly evolving or volatile environment. Context and conflict analyses such as the approach employed by CBP is not appropriate for all situations. In areas that remain highly unstable, there may be more value in accelerating implementation than in delaying through a protracted assessment process. Another tool in the community stabilization toolbox, other than CBP, is the “rapid grant mechanism”.¹² This approach uses very rapid assessments to identify small-scale grant interventions with the objective of creating short-term stability gains. Grants could include funding for an event, competition or even a resource distribution through the local administration. The concept of the rapid grant mechanism is based on the need to move in quickly to address chronic instability, or to capitalize on windows of opportunity to improve stability, prior to engaging in a long-term structured process, as well as retaining the capacity to withdraw quickly should the security situation deteriorate. In such cases, the intention is not to obtain a comprehensive picture, but to “test the water” and adapt to the evolving environment or outcome of the grant.¹³ Where a grant produces a stability dividend, others can follow, building on the first success in what has also been labelled “iterative programming”, which neither uses a workplan nor is based on a logical framework. The rapid grant mechanism can be used as an entry point, with CBP as a follow-on.

Textbox 8: Restarting civilian–leadership interactions through a rapid grant mechanism – Somalia

In Somalia, the forced removal of Al Shabaab from urban areas such as Afgoye and Dinsoor between 2014 and 2017 left displacement-affected communities with humanitarian vulnerabilities and risks, recovery needs and different dimensions of instability, all distinct, but linked to one another. Liberated areas were inhabited both by conflict IDPs and receiving returnees; caretaker administrations were established, but the departure of the non-State armed actors to adjacent rural areas maintained insecurity and left a power vacuum and general lack of trust in local leadership; and African Union international peacekeeping forces that were maintaining security and communities remained fragmented, particularly as a result of perceived affiliations of different populations with the occupying group, Al Shabaab. Therefore, humanitarian and recovery needs among IDPs, returnees and the broader communities, such as those related to health, food security and shelter, were combined with factors that could destabilize the situation at any time. The entry point for community stabilization was to restart civilian–leadership interaction, through town hall meetings and establishing a community hall; to address intra- and intercommunal grievances through mediated dialogue and traditional forms of reconciliation (Green String Network, n.d.); and to provide rapid restoration of services and economic activity, as well as bolstering levels of social unity through sports and cultural events. Conditions were not yet conducive for sustainable recovery or durable solutions to displacement, but there was a critical need to reduce the imminent risk of re-emergent violence, displacement or crises in the short term, as a prerequisite, incremental step and foundation for longer-term recovery and stability.

Closely related to the context-specific core principle is the importance of being flexible and adaptable. Some, but not all environments impacted by displacement crises, particularly those driven by conflict, can be unpredictable, volatile and kinetic; pathways from instability to improved

¹² USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives has pioneered the rapid grant mechanism, a model followed by several other major donors supporting community stabilization (USAID, 2001).

¹³ USAID uses the expression “Act, Assess, Adapt”.

stability are non-linear. In such cases, support for improving community-level stability needs to be sustained over time, rather than being a one-off intervention. Retaining an optic and awareness of what is happening on the ground is critical to maintaining relevance. In practice, this is not always easy, both because donor requirements do not always allow for flexibility, particularly when logical frameworks or results-based management (RBM) guide programme design and implementation, nor if commitments are made in displacement-affected contexts.

Therefore, the community stabilization approach requires a solid context and conflict analysis; this should be a relatively ongoing process and embedded in the budget and in the monitoring and evaluation framework for a programme.

Conclusion

This paper began by justifying why partners and States need to find new ways of responding to the growing challenge of displacement crises and global processes and commitments through the “grand bargain” and other principles related to the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus. In the following two sections, the multidimensional impacts of displacement were presented, outlining the key characteristics of the community stabilization approach and core programming principles as a means to overcome these challenges, grounded in examples from displacement crises.

The eight conditions of the Durable Solutions Framework are broad, long term and in many contexts ambitious in the aftermath of displacement crises. For example, “access to effective remedies and justice” (condition 8) is only pursued decades after displacement occurs in some countries, if at all. The community stabilization approach is not intended to address all the conditions necessary for the attainment of durable solutions, nor is it a panacea to all challenges faced by displacement-affected groups. In reality, resolving displacement requires meaningful political commitment to address the drivers of displacement and in many cases a comprehensive, durable peace agreement.¹⁴ While these are not absolute prerequisites, where such conditions exist, the community stabilization approach can serve as a catalyst by creating necessary foundations for long-term recovery, particularly where the three core programming principles are not applied in isolation, but rather, are integrated and adapted to evolving situations on the ground. Where conditions are not yet conducive for durable solutions, the community stabilization approach can support affected populations to make incremental steps along the way.

Finally, while the community stabilization approach is presented as an incremental step towards longer-term recovery and stability or solutions to displacement, the level of integration with more traditional humanitarian interventions, particularly the humanitarian “cluster system”, is generally insufficient. Despite global commitments to strengthen the HDPN, this initiative has also spawned numerous debates related to humanitarian principles, empowering local leadership amid questions of accountability and capacity vis-à-vis the need to respond quickly and at scale. There is value in all these debates. In practice, fulfilling commitments to strengthen the HDPN and sustainably resolve displacement has necessarily introduced new modus operandi to the approaches of States and partners accustomed to working the way they always have. This paper advocates for a heightened focus on community stabilization approaches alongside other interventions, rather than replacing them, including responding to the emergency needs of displacement-affected persons; both because of the catalytic role this focus can have in facilitating the transition of displaced populations away from crisis, and because it lays necessary foundations for sustainable recovery and stability, and ultimately the attainment of durable solutions.

¹⁴ A comparison between Mozambique, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Liberia highlights starkly contrasting experiences of resolving displacement, largely due to differences in political dynamics.

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