

Good in a crisis

The Stabilisation Unit is already a well-established cross-departmental partnership, and its role is set to grow. **Suzannah Brecknell** meets its head to discuss conflict prevention – both overseas, and within Whitehall

In May of this year, as fighting rumbled across Libya, an international team of civil servants and civilian staff with expertise in fields such as infrastructure, policing and essential public services arrived in the country to identify likely threats to a quick recovery from the conflict. The UK-led team then produced a report for the United Nations, which will be leading on early recovery work in Libya.

This was the first time a team of this sort – known as a Stabilisation Response Team (SRT) – has ever been deployed, but it is unlikely to be the last. Originating in a Conservative manifesto pledge, SRTs were also mentioned in last year's Strategic Defence and Security Review, which set out an expansion of government's ability to deploy civilian and military stabilisation teams "as a long-term investment in a more stable world".

According to Sheelagh Stewart, head of the cross-departmental Stabilisation Unit (SU), which deployed the team, the main questions for SRTs are: "What are the pitfalls that will stop this country having a stable future, and what can we as an international community do to help them mitigate those pitfalls?". The answers, she suggests, are likely to fall into several categories, which also set out the aims of stabilisation work more broadly: ensuring public services can be delivered; maintaining the rule of law and public order; and finding ways to restore and boost the economy.

The SU was created in 2003 to help its parent departments (the Department for International Development, Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office) to work together more effectively in Iraq. It retains and deploys civilian and military experts to work in fragile states and advise governments and international bodies.

Over the course of last year, the SU deployed 349 staff in over 20 countries; right now, it has 177 people in the field. It has an online resource centre providing information, research and lessons for other departments, and can provide parent departments with staff in times of need. SU staff gave interim support to the DFID crisis response team as the Libyan war unfolded, and later recruited longer-term staff from its 200-strong Civil Service Stabilisation Cadre (CSSC).

Last year, the SDSR expanded the unit's remit to include conflict prevention and crisis response as well as post-conflict work. It also created a Building Stability Overseas (BSO) Board, which reports to the National Security Council, and includes representatives of the three international departments as well as other interested departments such as the Cabinet Office. The SU now reports to this board, which has recently published a BSO strategy emphasising the need for early warnings, rapid response, and "upstream" work to prevent instability from turning into conflict.

"We've always been able to do [rapid response]," insists Stewart. Last year, for example, the SU sent a team to Haiti to help the government recover while other agencies provided humanitarian relief. The SRT in Libya marked an important milestone, however, because it was the "first test of a civilian rapid reaction capability that's capable not just of moving individuals but of moving a fully-formed assessment team". It took just 18 days "from the moment when the ministerial button was pressed" to recruit a team, organise their support in Libya and get them on the ground.

This rapid response was made possible by the SU's flexible resource structure. It has around 70 core staff seconded from a number of government departments, and can also draw on a Civilian Stabilisation Group (CSG) including around 800 civilian experts and the CSSC. "We have a top tier who are trained, prepared and ready to go," says Stewart, "but we only pay for them when we actually need them. It's a very efficient model: we call it the pay-as-you-use model."

This model fits well with current thinking at senior levels of the civil service, says Stewart: "Sir Gus O'Donnell's idea is that when there's a crisis you

Photograph/David Barrett



burden-share across government. It would be very difficult for one department to provide 50 people to work on a crisis, but if you share it across 10 departments it's manageable." Not only is this model "right for the times we work in", she says, but it has "proved robust" when the pressure is on.

Stewart is clearly proud of the unit's lean operations, though the cross-departmental Conflict Pool – which funds the SU – will actually be increasing over the spending review period. The pool is set to grow from £256m this year (of which £12m is dedicated to SU) to £309m by 2014-15. The BSO strategy also announced the creation of an Early Action Facility within this pool, to support more rapid response work.

Afghanistan currently accounts for around half of the SU's work. As allied forces prepare to leave the country, the unit's work is shifting away from stabilisation towards development work. Stewart, whose background is in international development, describes stabilisation as "a foundation for longer-term development", and emphasises that it must therefore concentrate on building a good platform for growth.

"In the very early days, when we were thinking about hearts and minds, we'd do quick projects because we thought we needed quick impact," she says. While the need for quick impact remains, she continues, it must always further longer-term aims. So you could, for example, use brutal methods to successfully restore order, but this "will never contribute to a long-term safe and secure society. The way you do things in the beginning has got to fit in with your longer-term plan."

Stewart emphasised the importance of shared planning in a presentation at the Overseas Development Institute last year, arguing that all relevant agencies must contribute to a joint plan, rather than attempting to merge their own plans together.

Does she have advice for other departments seeking to plan together for shared outcomes? There needs to be top-down commitment, she says, and at the other end of the organisation there must be people

Stewart: Plans must be shaped from the outset by involved departments, rather than cobbled together from separate strategies

who "understand how important it is to be able to work across departmental barriers" and have the right skills and experience to do so. All of the staff in the unit's planning cadre, for example, have been on the military planning course. "They're not military planners, but they understand how military planning works," she explains, so they can work with a military plan when needed. She also advises that in the case of shared planning, "You need to do it sooner rather than later: it is quite difficult to plan together at the last moment."

The SU is seen, says Stewart, as something of an international trailblazer. Its model of close civilian-military partnerships and adoption of a "one-government" approach to fragile states has been copied by a number of other countries. The creation of a senior-level stabilisation board with links to the National Security Council should support this approach, and puts the unit on a "good footing", says Stewart – though she's loath to make comparisons with previous arrangements. Instead, she emphasises that cross-government governance and delivery reflects good practice on conflict response. "All the evidence suggests that when [conflicts] happen, we need to bring all of the skills of government to bear on the problems," she says. "We need defence, diplomacy and development operating together." ■

CV highlights

- 1991** Moves to England to complete a PhD at the Institute of Development Studies. Stewart arrived from Zimbabwe, where she grew up and completed a law degree before becoming co-director of the domestic violence charity the Musasa Project
- 2000** Joins DfID as a governance adviser in Malawi, later moving to work in Bangladesh
- 2004** Becomes head of the governance and conflict profession within DfID, leading the production of a fragile states paper
- 2006** Appointed DfID's deputy director for South Asia
- 2010** Made head of the Stabilisation Unit