

# Close the Gap: How to Leverage Local Analysis for Stabilization and Peacebuilding

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STUDY  
October 2023

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Without a granular understanding of the key political dynamics at work in the towns, villages and neighborhoods where violence occurs, even the most well-intentioned stabilization and peacebuilding efforts are shots in the dark – at risk of hitting the wrong targets or falling far short of their intended impact. Unfortunately, the analytical push that is required to illuminate remote areas and inform smarter, more targeted investments in stabilization and peacebuilding remains the exception: mostly, local political analysis takes the shape of pilot programs, even in cases where challenging contexts also have high political priority for donors. However, these pilots and experiments have accumulated to a point where it is possible to draw initial conclusions from them and to assess the promise that local political analysis systems hold as core instruments in the stabilization and peacebuilding toolkit, especially in priority areas. This study discusses why local political analysis is necessary in the first place, why it holds such potential for improving stabilization and peacebuilding interventions, and why it is still not used more widely. Regarding the latter, it also offers some directions for how decision-makers and others can overcome these obstacles.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors were fortunate to be able build on a lot of practical exposure and access in making this first attempt at mapping an emerging field about which there is little if any analytical research. Philipp Rotmann is indebted to Thomas Zahneisen, Clemens Hach, Sophia Armanski and Florian Broschk, to numerous diplomats, to experts in development, stabilization, monitoring and evaluation, and learning, as well as to UN peacekeeping staff who shared their struggles and successes in improving local situational awareness over the years. At GPPI, the authors benefited from many discussions with Syria experts Tobias Schneider and Karam Shoumali, with humanitarian action experts Julia Steets and Elias Sagmeister, as well as from incisive reviews of earlier drafts by Melissa Li and Jakob Hensing. Moreover, they are grateful for support from Sophia Armanski, Clemens Hach and Klemens Semtner (at the German Foreign Office) and to Anja Erbel and her colleagues (at the Stabilisation Platform). Finally, they would like to thank Katharina Nachbar and Sonya Sugrobova for their editorial and layouting work on this study.

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# Executive Summary

Too often, foreign organizations that invest in programming in conflict-affected contexts only have an incomplete picture of the key political dynamics that are at play there. Current standard analysis (such as internal reports from those who implement programs or external research from academics or NGOs) offers some insights but also has important limitations. As a result, officials who are making billion-euro decisions about international stabilization and peacebuilding efforts often do so with significant knowledge gaps. Most crucially, current analysis in conflict-affected areas usually falls short of three essential objectives:

- 1. Provide key information about hard-to-reach and potentially dangerous areas:** The geographic and social distance (in terms of language, culture and lived experience) between long-marginalized communities and life in capital cities is rarely bridged by researchers. Because of that, their findings seldom represent the reality in areas where programming could be most useful.
- 2. Provide actionable and timely analysis to inform decision-making:** Much reporting is published too late or in a fashion – as academic papers, for example – that busy officials find hard to absorb and use.
- 3. Triangulate data and counter blind spots or conflicts of interest at the local level:** Often, implementers working on programs in a certain area are the ones who are physically closest to the action – but they are usually in a weak position when it comes to reporting about realities that the respective local authorities (or an armed group) would rather not see relayed to donors.

Countless white papers from every major international donor – including the UN<sup>1</sup>, the US<sup>2</sup>, the UK<sup>3</sup>, and Germany<sup>4</sup> – have noted that peacebuilding or stabilization efforts need to shape the respective political environment in which they operate, and that those who implement programs must be willing to take risks and flexibly adapt to changing circumstances. Doing so necessitates better, timelier and more granular analysis. Unfortunately, such analysis – that is, analysis which attempts to simultaneously deliver on all three essential objectives or ‘political analysis systems’ outlined above – remains the exception. If it happens, it is undertaken mostly in the form of pilot programs with limited financial, staff or political resources.

Still, important lessons can be drawn from the few past and current local political analysis systems that do exist. These were and are funded and operated by parts of the German, UK and US governments as well as some UN agencies. For this purpose, we interviewed 60 policymakers (mostly German, British and US government officials), practitioners and contractors. In addition, we ran one closed-door workshop with government practitioners and independent analysts working in the peacebuilding and stabilization field. Through this research, we found examples for effective local political

analysis systems in Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>, Somalia<sup>6</sup>, Bolivia<sup>7</sup>, Libya, Ukraine, Syria, the Sahel, and Honduras.

These examples show how, when used effectively, local political analysis can enable better stabilization and peacebuilding programming. It can inform better investment decisions, including by answering questions like: Which actors are likely to share the same strategic goals? Which issues are most pivotal? And which geographic areas are more open to change than others? By providing regular and granular data on the respective local context and thus helping implementers manage risks, local analysis can also enable the continuation of programming in violent areas or in places overtaken by violent groups. Moreover, local political analysis systems can build a collective understanding between different departments as well as key diplomatic, defense and development stakeholders by providing a shared evidence base from which to debate, discuss and decide together. Finally, they can improve the quality of diplomatic engagements by providing alternative perspectives to decision-making elites and by tracking perceptions from different geographic areas, ethnic groups and other, potentially marginalized communities that can serve to better understand and navigate conflict trends.

We also set out to understand what is different about these country examples in the hope that this may help us explain why local political analysis is not used more widely and effectively elsewhere. Too often, the analysis systems we studied were built at too small a scale or for very short time horizons only. Similarly, the purpose of gathering local information and analyzing it was often not clearly defined, meaning there was not a clear sense of how the data would be used. Even the best local political analysis can serve stabilization and peacebuilding goals only if the government departments and multilateral organizations that use it are equipped to take up the lessons that emerge from it. Without sufficient staff and resources to translate findings into actionable information and actually implement lessons, analytical outputs will only increase the burden on decision-makers while their findings remain under-utilized. Equally unsatisfactory: when local political analysis outpaces the adaptiveness and flexibility of peacebuilding and stabilization programs themselves, it becomes politically undesirable for implementers to identify problems or opportunities about which they cannot do anything.

These barriers are not inevitable, but overcoming them requires sustained investment. Therefore, while donors and major multilateral intermediaries need to improve their approach everywhere, they should prioritize contexts in which there is a “triple gap” when it comes to community-level political awareness. These are contexts (1) in remote, dangerous and dynamic environments, (2) with insufficient existing sources of actionable and reliable political analysis, and (3) where the intervening actors have an important stake in steering the intervention to maximize impact and/or minimize unintended effects.

Below, we present a step-by-step guide to setting up and making effective use of local political analysis for adaptive stabilization and peacebuilding in such areas. The four key steps are:

- 1. Tailor (and resource) a local political analysis system together with the corresponding intervention.** Such a customized system will only be effective if it is sufficiently resourced for a clearly defined purpose, and if its outputs are

used effectively for adaptive programming. The concrete price tag of ‘sufficient resources’ will depend on the context, the purpose of the analysis system, and what it takes to make the resulting analytical products actionable for the policymakers in charge of steering the adaptive programs.

- 2. Define steering goals, analytical indicators and decision-making mechanisms.** Along with the goals and adaptive mechanisms of the actual intervention (outlined, for instance, in a country, subnational or regional strategy), it is key to clearly define how the evidence from a local political analysis system will help to achieve these program goals. This includes outlining interim steps and how the evidence will serve to support key steps on the way toward achieving longer-term goals.
- 3. Assign clear ownership and determine who does what.** There are five key questions that need to be answered, and to which there will likely be different answers for every country, regional context and/or donor: Who controls the analysis system as a whole? Who collects the data? Who analyzes the data? Who translates the data into advice for action? And who decides based on the evidence?
- 4. Assign the necessary staff and financial resources to not just produce but also use the data.** Local political analysis does not just cost whatever the budget of the external entity procuring the data; it also requires the corresponding staff capacity on the side of the donor or implementing organization to translate community-level political observations into actionable information, to take key decisions for steering the overall intervention, and to manage the continuous review and adjustment of the local political analysis system itself (meaning its goals, analytical requirements or indicators, processing, and product design).

# Introduction

## The Gap in Understanding Local Politics

In trying to help build peace or stabilize a political order torn apart by violent conflict, donor governments and multilateral actors inevitably intervene in the local politics of the places in which they operate. A recent German government white paper echoes cutting-edge research on the concept of ‘adaptive peacebuilding’ when it defines the political objective of Germany’s stabilization and peacebuilding work as “to shape the political environment, aimed at influencing key actors, curbing violence and promoting political and societal negotiation processes.”<sup>8</sup>

However, successfully engaging in the politics of another country requires a detailed and up-to-date understanding of the actors that matter, along with their interests as well as the power relations and the loyalties and rivalries that shape their interactions. Most violent conflicts today occur not (only) between national armies but between a variety of armed groups and political stakeholders, often covering only parts of a country (the ‘subnational’ level). At the same time, they are intimately linked with dynamics in other countries (the ‘transnational’ dimension). In such a situation, the already fickle forces of social and political aggregation that bind a national society together in peacetime are even weaker. If the credo that “all politics is local” captures an important truth about, say, contemporary US politics, the same notion is even more central to understanding the political realities in a country fragmented by violent conflict.

This is true at every level, from national to subnational to the politics of an individual community. What does it mean, for instance, if an international actor’s local allies call someone a terrorist? What does it mean if their troops eagerly accept military training and arms supplies provided by outsiders but make far too little money or haven’t received their wages in months? What does it mean if local elite representatives show a united front in favor of certain ethnic quotas for distributing power? At the community level, what does it mean if a hospital director or a school principal flies the flag of the de-facto rulers of the respective town on top of their building – and does it matter if the flag is that of a radical Islamist group or a secular rebellion? Might the same flag mean something different in one town, where the group’s control is firmly established, compared to another town in the next valley over, where there is an active struggle going on between the same Islamist group and another armed group? Peacebuilding and stabilization actors often do not answer these kinds of questions as thoroughly or in as timely a manner as would be required for them to live up to the principles of conflict-sensitive programming or ‘do no harm’.

Yet even if international actors did attempt to answer these questions, in remote, hard-to-reach and dangerous areas there is sometimes simply no reliable data or analysis on such political basics. We know most about the places that are safe and easy to access, and most about the perspectives of those who are easy to talk to or eager to share

their views. We know much less about locations that require many hours or even days of strenuous travel to get to, and least about the perspectives of people who would rather shoot at us than talk to us. In most conflict contexts, the lived experience of remote communities is so different from that of their often higher-educated, better-off ethnic or national brethren in the capital city that even members of the latter group – from which donor country embassies and implementing organizations tend to recruit what they call “local staff” – have trouble accurately interpreting what is going on in hard-to-reach areas. Gathering information about such remote places and communities is possible, but it is much more difficult to validate anything we learn from that data and to counteract the many kinds of inadvertent bias that threaten to distort our findings. It is therefore far from surprising that international interventions in conflict contexts have long been found to suffer from an insufficient understanding of local realities at a community level.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, these interventions have at best been inefficient; at worst, they have reproduced or contributed to the very ills they set out to remedy.<sup>10</sup> Some unknowingly became ensnared in local conflict dynamics and infighting (as was the case for the United States in Somalia, where the US military was supplied with intelligence by local people hoping to use American raids to settle clan disputes).<sup>11</sup> Others massively fueled local corruption and abuses of power (as in Iraq, where the US and the UK unwittingly helped diaspora leaders impose an ethnic quota system that undermined effective and accountable governance<sup>12</sup>). Some missions neglected to account for the ways in which women, youths and other marginalized communities experience conflict and post-conflict situations differently from men (take, for example, the international failure to anticipate and mitigate the so-called feminist backlash in Kosovo, which led to preventable harms inflicted on women).<sup>13</sup>

Those implementing external interventions in spaces afflicted by violent conflict have also found that the political fundamentals of power and conflict can differ massively even at a very small geographic scale, particularly if it is difficult to move from one small town to the next, or from one district to the next one. In such contexts, an intervention that worked on, say, the left bank of a river suddenly created new trouble when replicated on the right bank, just a few kilometers away. Hence the often-used notion of “spaces” (rather than countries or regions): individual conflicts are often hard to disentangle in practice. They often cross formal political borders and the – far less formal and visible – social boundaries in conflict-affected societies are often as, if not more important in shaping violence and security than formal ones.<sup>14</sup>

In response to these lessons, a few governments and international organizations have made attempts over the last two decades (if not longer) to acquire a more granular understanding of key local realities and to use this understanding to better calibrate their interventions. However, these attempts have not seen much independent analytical attention, if any at all. This study is a first step to remedy this. We explore: (1) why a better and more granular understanding of local realities is necessary; (2) what kinds of approaches to local analysis have been tried by states and multilateral organizations in the last two decades and what their particular strengths and weaknesses might be; (3) how these approaches can be used for strategic decision-making around stabilization and peacebuilding; (4) some of the barriers to their use in this regard; and (5) ways of overcoming these barriers.



To investigate these questions, we interviewed 60 policymakers (mostly German, British and US government officials), practitioners and contractors and ran one closed-door workshop with government practitioners and independent analysts. Apart from the many examples of places where the lack of sufficient understanding contributed to failure, our research draws on good-practice cases from Afghanistan, Somalia<sup>15</sup> and Bolivia<sup>16</sup> (which have already been written up by others) as well as from Libya, Ukraine, Syria, the Sahel, and Honduras (which were highlighted during our interviews).

We focused on political interventions<sup>17</sup> along the spectrum of stabilization and peacebuilding. In treating these two multi-faceted, contested concepts as a sliding scale rather than a dichotomy, we emphasize that there is a range of interventions: One end represents more modest, incremental, conservative, and short-term interventions, usually marked by a narrower overlap between the interests of international donors, local powerbrokers and local populations (what we refer to as ‘stabilization’). The other end represents a more expansive, transformational and ambitious approach that emphasizes a broader set of interests that need to be satisfied to achieve sustainable peace (what we call ‘peacebuilding’). In the real world, plenty of interventions fall somewhere between these analytical ideal types.

Throughout this study, we speak of spaces as ‘remote’ and ‘violent’ – a powerful social construction. Of course, it is not geography that makes for remoteness or violence, and those are not immutable characteristics. The social construction of certain places as remote and violent reflects a combination of certain material realities – limited infrastructure, socio-economic and political marginalization of the people living there, a presence of armed, violent actors, and actual fighting or repression of the civilian population – with an equally important shared perception among local communities that echoes longstanding histories of subjugation or neglect. The latter tends to amplify the former, which can lead to paradoxical effects: where national-level political analysts would ignore a few reports of violence happening far away from the capital as expected background noise from an irrelevant part of the country, a travel risk adviser may process that same set of reports as the tip of an underreported iceberg of incalculable violence and danger and subsequently tighten the organization’s travel restrictions – thereby only amplifying the social remoteness of the place by making it impossible to go there and gain an accurate picture of the violence that is actually taking place. While important, our study focuses on the ways in which information informs strategy, rather than investigating the issues of how to collect data in remote and violent places. The latter has been explored elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, a note on our own perspective: our previous research has touched upon local political dynamics in conflict and how international interveners observe and engage with them in different ways. It includes the evolving role of intelligence and civil affairs teams in UN peace operations, how the US military learned from local experiences in Iraq, and the logic and success of small-scale community development and peacebuilding programs in Afghanistan, to name just a few.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, we have worked closely with the German Federal Foreign Office and its Stabilisation Platform on reviewing and advising the German government on the development of its third-party community-level political monitoring system (called “Außenpolitisches Kontext-Monitoring”, or AKM).<sup>20</sup> For that reason, quite a few of our recent, Germany-specific observations about concrete examples are based on this work. We have combined these with additional research covering the US, the UK and other international actors.

# Local Political Analysis

## Why It Is Necessary – and Difficult

Stabilization and peacebuilding approaches leverage a wide range of targeted investments – from building infrastructure to facilitating dialogue – to influence the political dynamic in a given context in ways that help local partners find a path out of violence and toward some kind of peace. But what investments should stabilization and peacebuilding actors prioritize? And how to pursue them? The mantra of “local ownership” does little to answer these questions – there are always many different local owners to consider and their priorities often conflict. In other words: there is politics going on even amidst violent conflict, like everywhere else.

To intervene in a conflict space, then, is to enter into an existing and constantly evolving web of political relationships, loyalties and rivalries, interests and power games. It is therefore key that donors keep track of which local partners’ interests really align with the particular strategy for stabilization or peacebuilding they are supporting, something that went catastrophically wrong in Afghanistan where the US-led intervention naively aligned itself with many actors who ultimately undermined even the baseline goal of countering terrorism, let alone second-order objectives like state-building, establishing democracy or protecting human rights.

Which types of practical interventions – like building a road, a school or a police station, training a military or police unit, or facilitating dialogue between feuding groups – best lend themselves to effective support by outsiders who want to help promote that particular strategy? In what specific places – be it villages, towns or subnational regions – are these investments necessary to give the chosen strategy a solid chance of success? How should an investment in one sector or place be complemented or adjusted to avoid inadvertent effects that may escalate, for instance, if one community gets access to new resources while a neighboring community gets nothing? Lives depend on how well these questions are answered. And billions of euros – more than four billion in 2021 alone, per the latest OECD figures – are being invested on the basis of these answers.<sup>21</sup>

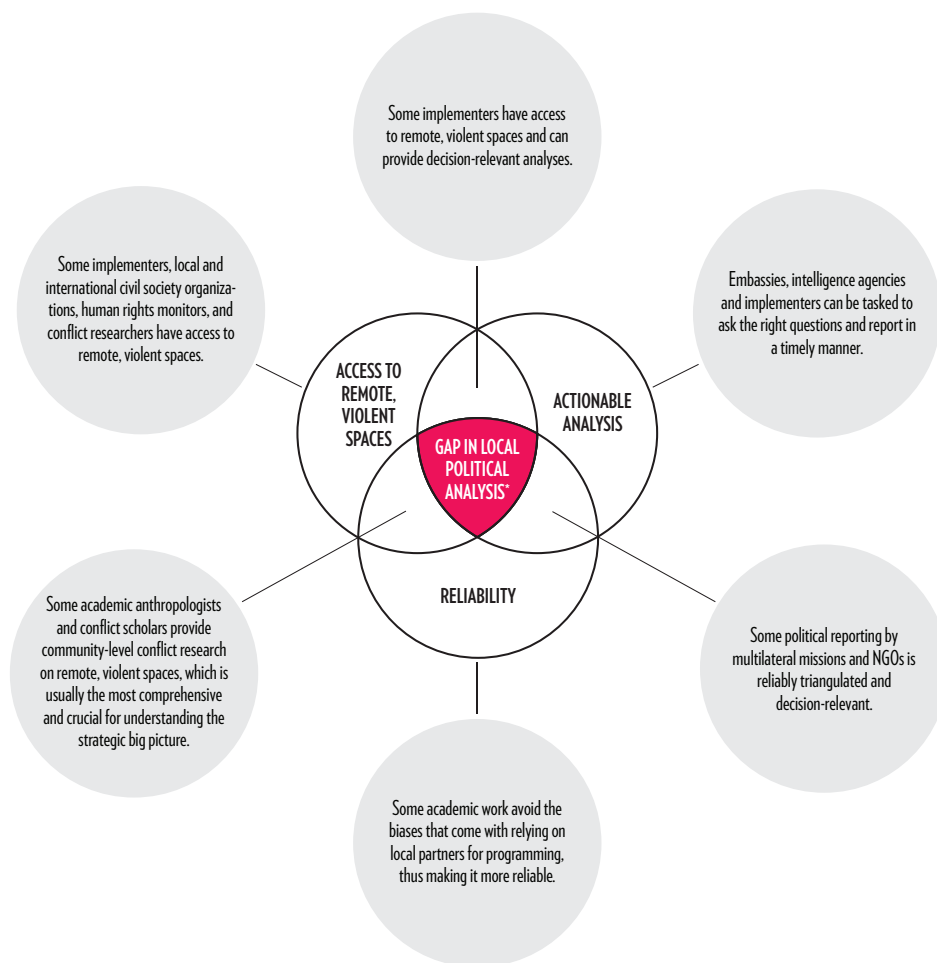
In a stable, mostly non-violent context, donor officials based in the respective capital or visiting from abroad can travel the country and see for themselves. Those who lack the time to do so can talk to local journalists, researchers and activists who travel a lot and thus gather a range of perspectives on what is going on even in remote parts of the country. Foreigners with limited local language skills who are dispatched to a country on one- or three-year rotations still often lack the sufficient contextual understanding to interpret everything they hear. However, this established system of learning about the local context still provides for at least some oversight and responsibility for political decisions on the part of donors and creates opportunities to inform frequent and appropriate changes to their programming as local political and conflict realities change.

In contrast, this is much harder when bad roads and active fighting limit the reach of intervention managers based in a capital city, often many hours of travel time and enormous social distances – in terms of culture, politics and language – from the places they are trying to understand and influence. In fact, international staff and, in many cases, local staff employed by international organizations are often prohibited from travelling to more dangerous and remote areas by their employers’ security systems. This is sometimes due to a credible risk assessment, but sometimes such restrictions are also forced by the precautionary principle because there is no risk assessment (which, in turn, is often the result of a lack of understanding of the local context). Travel generally takes much longer and is much more dangerous for outsiders even from the same country (for instance, when they belong to the “wrong” ethnic or social group), so in more dangerous and volatile contexts there are far fewer independent travelers whose observations donor officials can collect over lunch or coffee in the faraway capital. The few monitoring systems that do exist must balance the quest for information with the safety and security of those tasked with undertaking interviews (and those who are being interviewed).

Often, the task of gathering local data is left to implementers who are also responding to massive donor pressure to “start the work quickly.” Key project design choices might thus be based purely on the input of local authorities or triangulated only by a few phone calls with people who are supposedly based in the area in question and asked to report their honest answers to the project designer’s questions. Such processes frequently ignore the reality that only a few individuals in a remote community have access to international interlocutors. What is more, these individuals are often under massive social pressure to maximize the potential benefits of international spending for their particular communities or loyalty groups and might thus paint a rosier picture of the local situation.

In violent, politically unstable spaces, the challenging relationships between implementing organizations and local authorities are particularly difficult to navigate. Implementers are the ones who are physically closest to the action, but they are usually in a weak position when it comes to reporting about realities that the respective local authorities (or a local armed group that leans on them) would rather not see relayed to donors. Every time on-the-ground implementers learn anything that might put the survival of their project and its staff in jeopardy, even when there is no direct pressure, they get trapped between their contractual obligations vis-à-vis donors and the need to maintain good relations with local powerbrokers. Staff in implementing organization understandably feel the strongest obligation toward local beneficiaries, which creates additional resistance against reporting about local developments that could trigger an adjustment or even a winding-down of a program that benefits local people. This may lead to gaps in implementers’ own reporting which, in a domino effect, can leave external donors and interveners severely under-informed about the contextual assumptions behind their investment choices – and, therefore, their chances of success.

Figure 1: The Gap in Local Political Analysis



\* Most analysis does not simultaneously: (1) cover remote, violent spaces; (2) provide timely and actionable analysis; and (3) triangulate data to account for local-level conflicts of interest.

Given these challenges, finding sufficiently reliable information when operating in remote, potentially violent spaces and reviewing it frequently is no small feat. It requires stabilization and peacebuilding actors to find remedies for three key challenges:

**1. Access:** Getting to ask political questions, at all and in a way that is safe for all involved

The remoteness of a location alone poses obvious practical challenges for frequent research visits, as does the danger of getting caught up in or even becoming a target of violence. However, equally if not more important is the social distance between long-marginalized peripheral communities and a far-away capital city: it can make it difficult to visit areas where violence takes place and ask political

questions – not just for international personnel but even for nationals of the same country who are from a very different social background. Doing so in a way that also ensures the safety of both the interviewer and their interviewees is even more challenging.

**2. Actionability:** Asking the right questions and providing timely answers in a useful way

A lot of reporting from many different parts of the ‘peace industry’ does have elements of local political analysis, even if that is rarely the main focus. However, actors that manage to gain geographic and social access – like journalists or independent researchers – are rarely the ones that ask exactly the questions that donors need answered to improve their operational decision-making and design more flexible, adaptive programs. Their work also rarely reaches donor decision-makers’ desks in time to inform key decisions. What is more, they are often presented in a fashion – as academic papers, for example – that busy officials find particularly hard to absorb and use.

**3. Reliability:** Triangulating data and countering blind spots or conflicts of interest at the local level

When it comes to ensuring reliability, any political research in remote, violent spaces faces challenges. To the extent possible, triangulation of sources and other basic good practices of social research are necessary. They are, however, particularly difficult to ensure when those collecting data operate under specific pressures or face conflicts of interest that may skew an organization’s reporting in a particular direction. For example, local implementers may want to ensure continued support for local beneficiaries or not endanger their relationship with a local powerbroker.

This challenge is rarely appreciated sufficiently, and rarely is it adequately distinguished from other risks such as corruption or intentional manipulation. While the latter two dangers are obviously important to guard against, what we emphasize here are the basic structural risks that organizations or individuals face when they operate in an insecure environment and are dependent on the ignorance or goodwill of violent actors with local influence. For outsiders, keeping local authorities ignorant on a data collection effort is all but impossible. However, if research is the only purpose, it is often possible to build understanding and a basic level of trust. Reporting of what is common knowledge to local populations is often a risk or a reality that local powerbrokers are willing to accept. It is far more important to them to influence programming – and that makes implementing organizations particularly susceptible to undue pressure from the local level.<sup>22</sup>

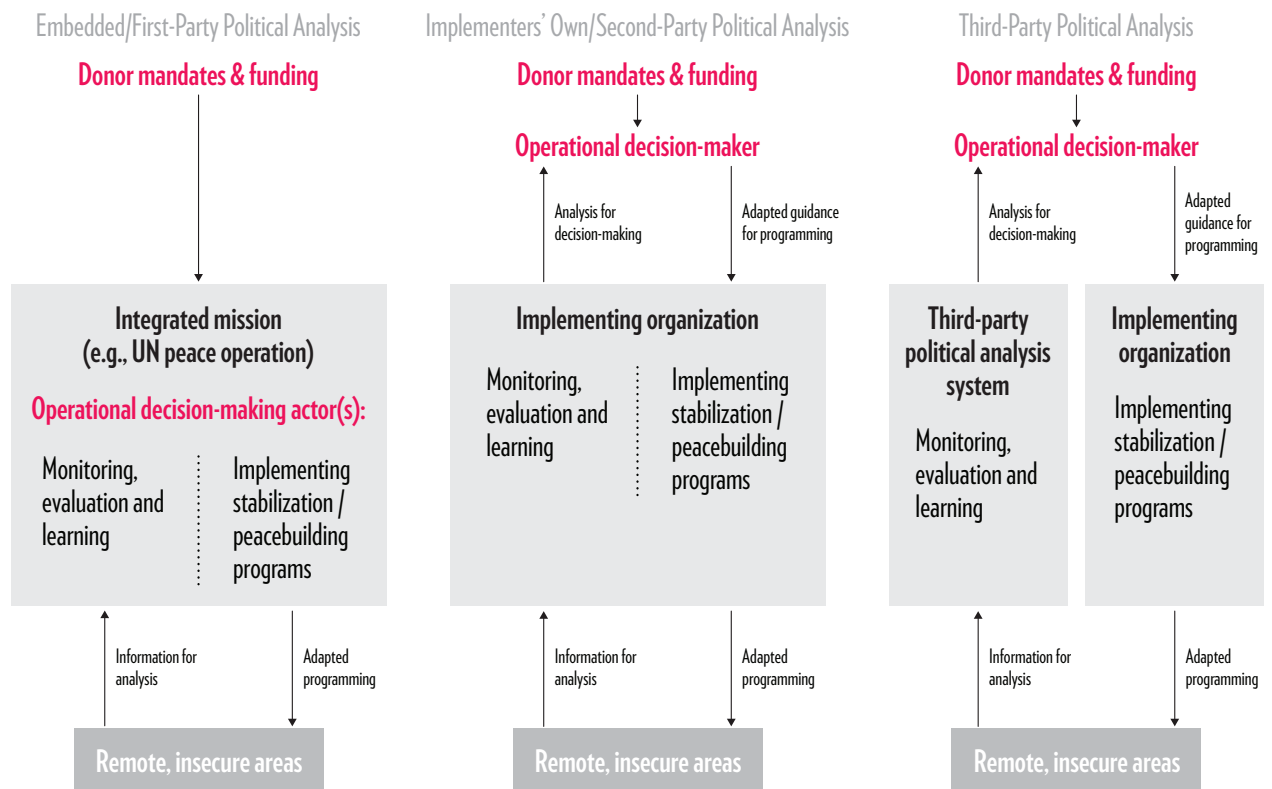
No international intervention happens in an information vacuum. However, many of the types of analysis policymakers rely upon (from academic articles and reports by multilateral organizations to NGO reporting, intelligence reports or internal updates) do not result from research efforts that managed to overcome these three challenges

simultaneously. As shown in Figure 2, the various types of reporting that do touch upon community-level politics in remote, violent spaces tend to rise to one or two of them, but almost never do they address all of them in a way that would be sufficient to inform sensitive political programming in conflict contexts.

What is missing, then – the gap identified in Figure 1 – is local political analysis in remote and violent places that (1) is frequently updated, (2) reliably covers key political issues that are relevant to a donor’s own goals and programming, and (3) is presented in a way that is timely and useful for operational decision-making. In the next chapter, we summarize the results of our review of various efforts and initiatives that aimed to achieve all of these things and present their key strengths and weaknesses.

# Three Approaches to Leveraging Local Political Analysis

Figure 2: Three Approaches to Leveraging Local Political Analysis



The most common type of in-depth analysis of local political conditions is usually undertaken during project design phases and conducted or commissioned by implementing organizations (where such analysis is often mandatory).<sup>23</sup> However, the extent to which the findings of such conflict analyses actually impact project design is often determined – and limited – by the project cycle and pressures to move on. As conditions in volatile contexts tend to change quickly, early-stage and one-off peace and conflict assessments (PCAs) are soon outdated. Much later in the project cycle, evaluations are still all too often conducted only ex-post – meaning too late to allow organizations to adapt but often too early or too narrowly focused on a single project to produce useful insights about an intervention’s wider political impact.

This problem has been recognized by a number of governments. Germany's white paper *Shaping stabilisation – Foreign and security policy concept for an integrated action for peace*, for example, notes that “one-off context and actor analyses at the beginning (...) quickly reach their limits.” Instead, it speaks of the need for “continuous learning and readjustment.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* also mentions the need for built-in “feedback loops” to allow for “strategic adjustments based on analysis, research, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness.”<sup>25</sup>

Common approaches for a continuous monitoring of local-level political developments in hard-to-access spaces broadly fall into three categories: they are either (1) embedded within a funder's own organization, (2) outsourced to implementers, or (3) outsourced to dedicated analytical outfits. Expanding on the common practice of calling the latter approach ‘third-party monitoring’, we might label embedded approaches ‘first-party monitoring’ and call implementers’ own monitoring efforts ‘second-party monitoring’. Each approach comes with particular requirements, strengths and weaknesses.

## Embedded (or ‘First-Party’) Analysis

Embedded monitoring of developments in remote, violent spaces requires a vast, geographically dispersed and robust presence on the part of the intervening actor. Leaving aside humanitarian organizations, we identified three types of external political interventions that have developed the necessary reach into remote areas and communities: large-scale UN peace operations, military counterinsurgency or stabilization operations – in particular those led by the US in Iraq (2003-2010) and in Afghanistan (2001-2021) – and highly localized civilian development or peacebuilding programs in conflict-affected spaces.

The first type, the larger integrated UN missions, include so-called civil affairs teams that are, for the most part, staffed with locally recruited civilians who are then dispersed into small local offices that are integrated with military or police units from the same UN operation. The fact that these teams live close to communities in conflict zones but are simultaneously protected from the violence and able to draw on the massive infrastructure of a UN peace operation, particularly on its capacity to provide (air) mobility, makes for an impressive ability to engage with the local social and political fabric. As a result, these teams can provide useful day-to-day analysis of events on the ground, including early-warning information on escalatory dynamics.<sup>26</sup>

Large-scale military stabilization and counterinsurgency operations, the second type, have taken similar organizational approaches. In practice, this has meant deploying small military units across even the remote parts of a territory and appointing small-unit commanders, specially trained soldiers (sometimes also called civil affairs officers or specialists) or embedded civilian experts who lived close to local communities, interacted with them, learned from them, and thus provided a rare granular level of analysis about political dynamics on the ground. The best-known and probably most ambitious program of this kind was the US military's Human Terrain System (HTS), which embedded social scientists with military units in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2007 onward.<sup>27</sup> HTS was well received by field commanders, as



it was a way of unearthing “operationally relevant socio-cultural data and findings.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it sparked a massive debate in academia on whether supporting the wars in this way was ethically permissible for social scientists and anthropologists in particular.<sup>29</sup>

A third version of this basic organizational approach can be found in highly localized civilian development or peacebuilding programs in conflict spaces. In rare instances – such as for particular modes of implementation used by USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), in the case of Germany’s GIZ in some of its so-called transitional aid (“Übergangshilfe”) programs, or for several small organizations that operate at the intersection of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work – mixed teams of locally recruited and expatriate specialists live and work in communities close to or even in conflict zones. These teams are empowered to make their own programming decisions within very broad parameters set by donors, so they essentially act like mini-civilian missions operating their own local analysis-decision-action cycle. This approach is very much the exception, not the rule in development and peacebuilding, but it can be very effective – if the risk that outsiders become ensnared in local politics and thus subject to its pressures can be mitigated well. Because examples for these types of interventions were highly context-dependent, the security of their staff depended on maintaining strong networks with the local population and authorities. Sometimes, this would mean embedding with nearby military deployments. For others, it meant a decisive “no” to being associated with foreign militaries at all.

Embedded monitoring and analysis work is always based locally in the conflict space of interest. So it will be visible as part of and thus be identified with the foreign intervention or project, and it will depend on cooperation with at least some local actors, even if analysts are integrated with a heavily armed military unit. This makes embedded monitoring susceptible to different degrees of local pressure. And the more heavily armed and hunkered down behind blast-secure walls the analyst is, the more the social distance to the area’s local life will warp and bias their observations. Still, certain versions of embedded political analysis, such as the work of UN civil affairs teams, can be tremendously effective and cheap, provided that – and that is the biggest constraint – the massive infrastructure of an integrated civil-military peace operation is already in place and paid for.

## **Implementers’ Own (or ‘Second-Party’) Analysis**

The second type of context analysis is that run by those who implement peacebuilding and stabilization programming. These implementing organizations, which can range from locally based NGOs and commercial contractors to multilateral behemoths like UN or government-owned agencies like the German GIZ, regularly provide context monitoring to funders as a core part of their services. These updates are based on changes – in, for instance, the local political situation, levels of violence, public perceptions, or broader conflict trends – that implementers are seeing over the course of running programs in an area. In some cases, this information is collected by “contracting third parties to collect and verify monitoring data,”<sup>30</sup> but implementers dictate the scope of the work and, in this sense, they are closer to second- than third-party monitoring as seen from an external or funder’s perspective.

Unlike other systems that are designed as a means of independent monitoring separate from stabilization or peacebuilding programming in a country, these second-party monitoring systems are used to support programmatic work. For instance, they often serve to facilitate an implementer’s adherence to the ‘do no harm’ principle and a conflict-sensitive approach to implementation. Moreover, organizations use the information to ensure the security of their staff and to enable timely evacuation if necessary (the weight of the legal and moral responsibility for staff safety tends to skew an organization’s security perspective toward staff and operations).

The self-image of development professionals often aligns with the – often strongly expressed – expectations of local authorities that the former “stay out of politics,” so reporting on local politics by implementing organizations runs directly into the challenge of having to simultaneously maintain constructive relationships with local authorities. Plus, there are the moral dilemmas of working in a conflict space where local populations benefit from project activities and suffer if these activities are redirected, reduced or concluded. This can impact the quality of local analysis and reporting, in the sense that neither implementers nor those interviewed for monitoring reports will be fully honest if they perceive a risk that honest analysis may lead to the closure of or a reduction in funding for programs in remote locations.

Implementer-driven monitoring and analysis efforts are usually limited to the geographic and sectoral boundaries of the program with which they are associated. As a result, they tend to miss important political and conflict dynamics outside those boundaries, which makes it impossible for interveners to identify new opportunities or risks that may emerge elsewhere. Thus, these monitoring systems risk reproducing path-dependent geographical and sectoral choices in terms of where and what to fund (by monitoring only where implementation takes place).

Finally, most second-party monitoring done by implementers tends to prioritize immediate operational concerns, from staff safety to operational risks, as well as input or output metrics. Political impact and contextual dynamics, on the other hand, rarely receive sufficient attention as a subject of inquiry in these systems for that information to allow for adaptive programming.

## **Third-Party Local Political Analysis**

Several governments, such as the US, the UK and Germany, have commissioned private companies (who usually employ researchers based in the region, though unfortunately sometimes also in capitals only) to analyze local conflict dynamics on a more frequent basis.<sup>31</sup> These specialist organizations use many of the same techniques as development or humanitarian third-party monitoring (“TPM”) services, such as: opinion surveys (conducted via telephone or face-to-face and ranging from simple “yes”/“no” questions to semi-structured interviews); expert interviews (for example, with community leaders or local experts); sending researchers to the area in question (who then conduct individual interviews or group discussions); evaluations of social and traditional local media; stakeholder mappings; tracking outbreaks of violence; or political context analysis.<sup>32</sup> However, their work differs from the majority of third-party monitoring in three important ways:

1. The focus is on the politics of conflict rather than on humanitarian needs or development program outputs.
2. They ‘cover’ an area more continuously and as frequently as useful and feasible (for instance, through monthly survey cycles for simpler questions, and twice a year or annually for more demanding analyses).
3. They provide analytical products rather than just data, recognizing that seemingly objective observations cannot be interpreted accurately if they are divorced from specific context information – but without infringing upon the exclusive authority of policymakers in donor organizations to take strategic decisions.

In tracking data on a regular basis, some local analysis systems also gather information about how key conflict trends, including social cohesion, faith in government, the prevalence of non-state forces, and the competency of state forces, are changing over time. Better understanding these shifts is not just a technical addition to regular programming; it is fundamental to improving all aspects of how intervention strategies are developed and delivered.

From far away, some of the corresponding questions – take our earlier example of who supports a terrorist organization – look very sensitive and dangerous to ask. This impression is not wrong, but neither is it completely accurate. The black-and-white categories created, for instance, in sanctions resolutions by the UN Security Council or other legal instruments – this person or organization is listed as terrorist, or a wanted narcotics kingpin – capture only a small part of the multilayered political fabric of the places in which these people and organizations operate. This is particularly the case where criminal or violent extremist organizations are not hiding but trying to establish effective rule over an area and its people.

Decades of qualitative social research in conflict zones have shown that local populations observe what is going on, know a lot and, within the right context, are able to safely share a lot of things that are considered common knowledge within their local ‘bubble’ or context.<sup>33</sup> In many remote areas, what is most relevant to most people is what a certain development means for their own lives. A terrorism designation made in New York, Washington or Brussels, or the fact that a local leader is wanted by Interpol is not what is relevant to them – it is how much everyday security the group in question provides, how honest or corrupt it is, how compassionate, disciplined or brutal, and what kinds of adjustments are required from people so they can, for instance, keep running their businesses. What matters to most people is, in essence, to what extent they are able to get on with their lives without outside interference. For most individuals who live in conflict spaces (save the clandestine few who might plan a rebellion), having to accommodate a de-facto ruler is a fact of life, nothing they are ashamed of or would consider “supporting a terrorist entity.” And since they will probably never take an international flight or make an international bank transfer, the sanctions placed on a local group or warlord are very unlikely to ever touch them. It is quite safe, then, to talk about such accommodations with knowledgeable insiders who belong to the same community. In fact, this is what makes it possible and valuable to track the specifics of local social and political dynamics in conflict-affected contexts in a systematic and responsible way.

More and more countries that engage in stabilization and peacebuilding work are utilizing such tools to improve their security and defense strategies. One of the first and to date the largest local political analysis system of this kind was the Helmand Monitoring and Evaluation Programme (HMEP). Set up by the UK government in 2009, HMEP helped the UK-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the Afghan province of Helmand to target its support to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the Helmand Plan (discussed in more detail below).<sup>34</sup> This program collected quarterly data from a sample of Helmandis between October 2010 and September 2014. This level of investment has not been repeated since. Much more common, though, have been smaller-scale efforts, in line with the significantly lower levels of such program investment overall. For instance, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has run a number of similarly designed programs, albeit on a smaller scale, in Libya, Ukraine, Honduras, and elsewhere (also discussed in more detail below).

Between the large-scale investment of HMEP and the smaller investments by OTI lie the tailor-made foreign policy context monitoring systems (AKM) provided by the Stabilisation Platform (SPF) to the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) in Syria, the Sahel and Afghanistan. Since late 2017, the GFFO has used an AKM system to identify risks and opportunities for its bilaterally funded stabilization activities in opposition-controlled areas of Northwest Syria.<sup>35</sup> The primary goal has been to keep stabilization activities going under conditions that would have otherwise required shutting down entire programs – by systematically minimizing major political risks such as inadvertently supporting terrorist groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

In early 2020, a similar system was set up for Northeast Syria, to monitor a different set of risks adjusted to the political geography there. The system has since been expanded to cover the remaining areas of Syria where GFFO programs are being implemented. In 2021, a new system was put in place in the Liptako Gourma or tri-border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. And since 2023, another one is active in the Lake Chad region as a successor to a third-party monitoring system previously commissioned and implemented by the UK Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO). Finally, Germany has also set up a slightly different model for Afghanistan, which involves working through networks via consultant and SPF staff.

Third-party local political analysis systems were designed in response to the disadvantages of the other two types of approaches. They are meant to hit the 'sweet spot' between timely and strategically useful analysis of political developments in violent, remote and thus hard-to-access spaces, in ways that allow for effective triangulation against local pressures and biases. They are run by contractor organizations that combine teams of local analysts, who are usually able to move around more safely in the specific geographical and social spaces of interest, and external analysts who operate independently from implementing organizations and the respective pressures. These analysts ask questions and refine analytical products that speak to the specific – and frequently changing – needs of strategic decision-makers who are in charge of peacebuilding and stabilization efforts in highly volatile spaces.

However, despite the potential of these systems, our interviews with individuals working along the 'local analysis production chain' – so contractors, analysts and policy officials – suggest that in neither the UK nor in Germany have local political analysis systems yet made the leap from pilots or experiments to standard instruments in the

stabilization and peacebuilding toolkit. What is the range of situations in which the investment needed to set up and maintain these systems, and to run the kind of adaptive programming that benefits from frequent contextual analysis, is justifiable and worth it? In the absence of a (published) full-scale evaluation of either the UK-funded HMEP or any of the more recent iterations of this approach, the next two sections draw on observations about pilot systems for local political analysis to discuss their key benefits, along with the main challenges to their success.

# Local Political Analysis

## Key Benefits

Figure 3: Key Benefits of Local Political Analysis



This section highlights four ways in which local political analysis systems have been and could be used, namely: (1) to make wiser investments in stabilization programming; (2) to better understand the risks of investments in conflict-affected contexts; (3) to help build a shared understanding between key stakeholders of the priorities, challenges and opportunities; and (4) to improve diplomatic engagement with elites in a conflict-affected country. This section will go through each of these use cases, before moving on (in the next section) to unpack why these systems are not being used to their full potential.

### 1. More Effective and Successful Investments

Poor analysis can lead to bad investment decisions. This could be investments in local actors who do not share the same strategic goals as the external actor, in priority issues which turn out to be not as pivotal as first thought, or in geographic areas which are not as open to change as assumed. Similarly, overly simplistic and mechanistic assumptions about causal links (such as ‘people who are materially better off are less susceptible to engaging in violence’) often do not hold up to reality in stabilization and peacebuilding contexts where the entangled causes of violence are highly complex and locally varied, and where ‘fixing’ the underlying structural factors such as poverty would explode the resources and time commitment of any external intervention. Systems that gather local information offer decision-makers a way to stress-test potentially fatal assumptions that underpin their theories of change, and to change their strategy based on a greater understanding of the context.

Previous examples have shown how using local data to inform strategies can enable decisions that both deliver on international strategies and provide for the people in conflict-affected contexts. The UK's HMEP used qualitative and quantitative data collected by an Afghan research partner (with a sampling size of 4,000 households per quarterly survey wave) at both the provincial and district levels, using a longitudinal approach.<sup>36</sup> HMEP provided evidence to help decide what interventions were most likely to strengthen the legitimacy of the Afghan government and supported efforts to ensure effective leadership. It showed that international projects to, for instance, build schools did not increase the legitimacy of Afghan officials in the eyes of the local population. Instead, HMEP analysts found that a sense of “security” – defined by interviewees as freedom of movement (to, for instance, travel for work or to the market) rather than an absence of violence – was more closely associated with the perceived legitimacy of local authorities. The UK shifted its strategy accordingly.

Recognizing the potential of these systems for directing strategy, USAID's OTI builds flexibility into its work plans and strategies to allow for funding decisions to be guided by emerging evidence. For instance, between 2012 and 2017, one of OTI's objectives in Honduras “was to disrupt the systems, perceptions and behaviors that support violence.”<sup>37</sup> Research showed that that people felt most unsafe when walking to school and so the organization developed the Safe Schools Initiative, which:

*“(…) brought together school officials, parents, the surrounding community, local government and the police to plan and implement small-scale security improvements to schools suffering from the effects of gang influence. In one case, a high school was on the verge of shutting down – enrollment had dropped from 1,700 students to 412. USAID/OTI programming resulted in a 98 percent enrollment increase to 816 students in 2016. The Honduran police then reached out on their own to 16 additional schools to begin developing similar security plans.”<sup>38</sup>*

In other areas, this type of local political analysis has indicated which demographics and geographic areas should be the highest priority for efforts to achieve an overarching strategic objective. In Ukraine, from 2014 to 2017, OTI supported stabilization efforts in the country's eastern oblasts following Russia's proxy invasion of Donetsk and Luhansk. Initial program efforts concentrated on integrating internally displaced persons (IDPs) into host communities in the east, particularly given widespread anecdotal evidence that the influx of IDPs was creating tensions with host communities. OTI commissioned research into these alleged conflicts and found that reports of tensions between Ukrainian communities and IDPs were vastly overblown. Instead, the more pressing issue was that citizens in the eastern oblasts felt isolated from larger national reform efforts in the country. As a result, OTI's program managers decided on a major strategic shift to support activities, which helped these reforms deliver tangible results for citizens in the east and solidify national unity. Similarly, the German AKM system informed the GFFO's decision to switch its focus from Northwest to Northeast Syria. The system helped German decision-makers track not only the geographic expansion but also the varying degrees of political control exercised by the internationally sanctioned terrorist group HTS in Northwest Syria, and to identify opportunities for additional programming in the northeast of the country as access to areas in the northwest became more difficult.

## 2. Better Risk Tracking

Funding projects in countries impacted by conflict carries risks. It can exacerbate violence or fuel corruption,<sup>39</sup> money could end up in the hands of nefarious actors<sup>40</sup>, and there could be legal or political backlash against the donor government in its relations with other countries or at home in domestic politics.<sup>41</sup> However, taking risks is necessary to achieve meaningful change and excessive risk aversion on the part of stabilization and peacebuilding funders can have its own unintended consequences (for instance, when it limits the ability of NGOs to operate in a given context).<sup>42</sup> Pulling out of fragile and conflict-affected states altogether can make people there more vulnerable to abuse and harm, lead to spillovers of violence into neighboring states and beyond, put further pressure on humanitarian organizations to respond to increased needs, and create information gaps, especially around economic data and the situation of vulnerable groups, institutions and service provision. It can also accelerate cycles of decline, including by causing the collapse of social service provisions, furthering the erosion of already-weak institutions, and enabling the rise of corrupt and predatory actors, therefore also creating high re-engagement costs.<sup>43</sup> Syria is a powerful example: many states and multilateral organizations suspended their programming there “owing to fears of encroachment by internationally proscribed armed groups,” which facilitated the takeover of the abandoned communities by better-funded extremist forces.<sup>44</sup> This reality has now been recognized by a number of governments and multilateral organizations. For instance, the UK’s Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and the UN Peacebuilding Fund have enshrined a higher risk tolerance among their key principles.

Instead of withdrawing, then, donors need systems that provide them with regular and sufficiently granular data on the local context to help them better manage risks.<sup>45</sup> Such information can provide insights into the connections between different groups and actors and shed light on how the war economy functions, which makes it easier to assess the likelihood that funding might reach the wrong hands. By vetting organizations that are designated as terrorist on the basis of local knowledge (and thus going beyond generic queries of “sanctions check” databases), implementers can ensure that their clearance is reliable.

In 2017, the German government resolved to “make every effort to anticipate, identify and control the risks and effects of [its] actions better.”<sup>46</sup> The GFFO developed a so-called stabilization risk analysis (SRA) tool to identify and manage potential risks and unintended negative effects of strategic relevance (called “foreign policy risks”) that could affect Germany’s stabilization efforts and foreign policy goals in conflict-affected countries. In the fall of 2018, it began to integrate the SRA into all its programming on crisis prevention, stabilization and peacebuilding.<sup>47</sup> In order to manage particularly high-risk investments, such as the German humanitarian, stabilization and development portfolio in the opposition-controlled parts of Syria, a political context monitoring system was established. Its focus is on “observing factors that are relevant to foreign policy ‘red lines’ and project steering in areas such as terrorist funding” in a way that is “independent of the implementing partners to avoid conflicts of interest.” The system obtains “information that is freely available in the project areas (...) through contact networks there,” especially focusing on “the local control, condition and political focus of the relevant local governance structures and



scope for action by civil society groups.” A key use of the system, for instance, is to assess which of the potential grantees “collaborates with terrorist groups, pays them ‘tax’ or otherwise supports or tolerates them.”<sup>48</sup> For donors like Germany, it is very important to understand in detail the range of realities that lie between merely “tolerating” and actively “supporting” terrorist groups or any other actor, particularly once such groups entrench themselves as the de-facto rulers in a particular patch of land like various extremist groups have done in parts of Northern Syria and in the Sahel, West Africa and Afghanistan. If the latter is the case, local communities may have no choice but to “tolerate” if they want to survive, even if they are not required to actively support the group in power, for example. Such information is often less sensitive at the local level than it may appear from abroad (see page 19 above), but gathering it still requires careful attention to ensure the safety and security of the researchers involved.

When gathered safely and accurately, such granular political data can enable funding that would have otherwise been impossible. The territories in Northwest and Northeast Syria are not currently accessible for German diplomats and the staff of the GFFO’s implementing partners.<sup>49</sup> However, unlike many of its allies, the GFFO did not pull out of Syria completely; instead, it used local political analysis to continue to operate and support local populations in places where the risks are high but stabilization programming is also most useful. Through these systems, and by steering projects and adapting measures accordingly, the German government was able to remain engaged in these parts of Syria. This goes to show that local political analysis systems enable “explicit discussions, clear-cut decisions and internally-transparent documentation,” thereby helping “to build a culture of actively assessing, prioritizing and managing risks.”<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Feeding Local-Level Analysis Into a Shared Understanding of Context

The challenges posed by stabilization and peacebuilding require that different government agencies, such as defense, diplomatic and development actors, develop shared and locally tailored political strategies, and that they align these strategies as closely as possible with other governments and international organizations as well as civil society groups. As noted in the German government’s *Guidelines on Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace*, “[f]ragile contexts and complex conflicts require a comprehensive policy approach that bundles the contributions by the various government departments into a joint political strategy.”<sup>51</sup>

A key barrier to such collaboration is the lack of a shared understanding of the operating context. Departmental differences in planning processes, intelligence gathering and expert consultation can mean that each department relies on a different set of data points for assessing the conflict. What is more, there is no opportunity to compare notes and build a shared understanding. Some initiatives have already been developed to try and address this issue, such as cross-departmental working groups<sup>52</sup> or, in the case of the UK, the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) assessments,<sup>53</sup> which provide a space for shared discussions between departments ahead of a crisis prevention, stabilization or peacebuilding intervention. Local political analysis could contribute to these efforts by providing more regular and granular information for adaptive decision-making.

In the past, local analysis has certainly been used for day-to-day planning to develop a more holistic response from intervening governments. For instance, the HMEP in Afghanistan was initially set up by the UK Foreign Office, but between 2012 and 2013 it evolved into a resource that was used by all parts of the UK government (and many of its international partners, too). It created a shared starting point for understanding the conflict and thus enabled better collaboration between different departments and international staff.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in Somalia the UK developed the Somalia Stabilization Team, which consisted of officials from the UK Foreign Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence and focused on stabilization through “short-term, targeted and catalytic assistance.”<sup>55</sup> To do so, informal, regular forums “for donors, UN and selected implementers” allowed decision-makers “to share lessons and consider key issues.” This encouraged “a frank exchange of experiences and a mechanism to discuss possible solutions.”<sup>56</sup>

The German AKM system has also shown its value in enabling adaptive programming beyond the stabilization realm. The system was expanded to cover German development assistance as well as humanitarian action in Northwest Syria (and eventually in all areas where Germany implements projects) and has since enabled the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to undertake programs aimed at strengthening community resilience. Each of these three types of programs – stabilization and peacebuilding, humanitarian action, and development assistance – are covered by different decision-making logics: the red lines (i.e., the level of risk one is willing to accept before pulling out) of aid and its humanitarian principles are different from those that govern stabilization or development and resilience programming. Therefore, each requires different analytical inputs.

## 4. Diplomatic Engagement

When developing stabilization and peacebuilding programs, donor governments or other international actors must usually engage with national or sub-national elites in the respective country to develop strategies, get approval for their intervention and advocate for changes in national policy. However, in countries where conflicts rage no set of officials in positions of authority can claim to represent the population as a whole. In some countries that receive stabilization or peacebuilding funding, the government is actively fighting rebel groups active within the territory,<sup>57</sup> cracking down on dissenting voices<sup>58</sup> or lacks control over parts of the country.<sup>59</sup> Even when there is official state control, this may only be true in the capital or major cities. Central governments in conflict contexts often lack “authority over and/or an effective presence in their border regions” and “governance in these areas is often in the hands of traditional authority figures, such as tribal chiefs or religious leaders.”<sup>60</sup> Bringing these diverse groups together is a key challenge for any intervention. Including the heads of opposition parties or leaders of armed groups fighting the government is especially difficult and sometimes impossible.<sup>61</sup> Even when it does happen – for instance, as part of mediation efforts or peace talks – it is not enough to simply mirror the status quo of local preferences as doing so may only serve to further empower armed and violent actors or organized political elites (in the case of non-violent opposition parties).<sup>62</sup> Instead, it

is important that international actors have systems in place to track local perceptions in different geographic areas, including those of other ethnic groups and potentially marginalized communities, to better understand and navigate conflict trends.

Local political analysis can help donors improve their diplomatic engagement by providing them with pivotal data to feed into political negotiations. For instance, USAID/OTI's Libya programming has focused on strengthening "the conditions to enable a peaceful political transition," given the country's turbulent history of civil strife and power struggles among its political elite.<sup>63</sup> To understand these conditions better, the OTI Libya program supported monthly research that tracked popular perceptions of national-level political figures and key issues of concern among citizens. After several months of reporting, it became apparent that public opinion had shifted and was also more varied than suggested by key Libyan leaders at the time. The monthly reporting provided international actors with nuanced and more geographically balanced perspectives on key politicians and their momentum, which ultimately allowed for more informed – and more productive – discussions between international actors and Libyan stakeholders.

International stabilization and peacebuilding efforts, be they led by individual states or multilateral organizations, rarely work if there is no engagement with those impacted by conflict. Therefore, local political analysis systems can also help international organizations when advising international elites on the best path toward peace.<sup>64</sup> In Bolivia, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) set up a robust data and analysis unit called Project of Political Analysis and Prospective Scenarios (PAPEP). PAPEP collected original data via surveys, interviews and other methodologies and developed scenarios and political roadmaps to guide high-level government actors in making decisions aimed to reduce the risk of conflict.<sup>65</sup> In 2005, after then-President Carlos Mesa was forced out of government, the PAPEP team used its data to show the military that if they temporarily assumed power, that would be seen as a coup and provided strong evidence that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Eduardo Rodríguez, represented the best option for consolidating democracy. Swayed by the data, the Bolivian military did not assume power and endorsed Rodríguez.<sup>66</sup> In 2008, PAPEP showed that a vast share of Bolivia's population wanted the parties to continue their dialogue, pressuring actors to stay at the negotiation table.<sup>67</sup> Beyond improving the prospects for peace, this work also convinced local elites of the utility of the UN and its model, thus also improving relations more broadly.

# Why Local Political Analysis Is Not Used More Widely

## Key Challenges

During interviews for this study, we were able to identify four interrelated barriers to the effective use of local political analysis for decision-making in stabilization and peacebuilding interventions.

- 1. It is perceived as a tentative, experimental approach, which has made it difficult to secure consistent and reliable investment.** When built too small or for very short time horizons only, however, local political analysis systems are set up to fail.
- 2. Where investments happened at a promising scale, strategic direction has sometimes gotten lost.** Without clear guidance from decision-makers, the analytical output produced by analytical mechanisms became more of a burden to those same decision-makers than an effective way of empowering them. This was true even for powerful new analysis systems.
- 3. To effectively steer and frequently adapt their programs, officials must effectively translate highly localized analytical findings to the needs of political decision-makers** in ways that avoid overwhelming the latter with more information than they can process, and without compromising their decision-making autonomy. This is both a translation challenge and a resource challenge: if decision-makers are insufficiently equipped (in terms of staff) to understand and engage even with well-aggregated, well-presented analysis, that information will be left unused. That makes it not just pointless to generate that information in the first place, it also becomes dangerously irresponsible for external actors to run interventions in volatile conflict spaces while flying at least half blind.
- 4. Local political analysis works only if decision-makers are able to act on it, that is, if they adapt their policy interventions and programming.** When the information output produced by granular local analysis systems outpaces the adaptiveness and flexibility of the programs themselves, meaning decision-makers cannot act on the information in a timely manner, it becomes politically undesirable for them to identify problems or opportunities in the first place. At worst, the result can be a vicious cycle of “I don’t want to know what I cannot change” and “I cannot change what I do not know.”

Figure 4: Challenges of Local Political Analysis



Below, we discuss each of these four barriers in more detail before, in the next section, concluding by suggesting ways to overcome them.

## 1. Lack of Consistent and Reliable Investment

Few local political analysis programs have the financial and staff resources required to really achieve their full promise: a massive boost in better-targeted, smarter and ultimately more successful programming. Moreover, even where systems have significant and reliable funding, there is a lack of investment in the internal staff capacity (in a foreign ministry’s country teams, for instance) that would be required to digest and use the data. This is a typical chicken-and-egg problem: many existing local analysis systems remain in their early iterations, meaning they have limited funding or relatively short trial periods and operate in only a few of the conflict spaces where they could be beneficial. Like anything else, local political analysis requires a certain critical mass in terms of upfront investment to begin producing useful results.

What that critical mass entails in terms of density of the local coverage, staff numbers or overall financial investment depends on the purpose of a system (see next section). The larger systems examined for this study ranged in annual cost from one to three million euros (sums that still only amounted to no more than 2 percent of overall project investments in the same area and for the same timeframe). What is more, the timeline for investments in local political analysis needs to align with that of the intervention as a whole. As one interviewee said, “if you’re expecting to see transformational change immediately, it’s a fantasy (...) you need to properly invest in multi-year learning.” Of course, a completely new intervention will require tentative initial investments for just a year or two. As the commitment to an intervention grows, however, so should the planning horizon for both programming and local political analysis systems to make sure opportunities for learning and refinement are not wasted as a result of uncertain short-term plans.

With sufficient funding and a longer-term planning horizon, local analysis systems can greatly improve strategy, as discussed above. For many experts we interviewed (and as noted in a lessons learned paper by the UK Stabilisation Unit<sup>68</sup>), HMEP in Afghanistan was a system that was given the time and financial resources it

needed to deliver on its objectives. The scale of the UK intervention in Helmand was vast and the same level of investment is not necessary for every system to be successful. However, one important lesson from HMEP is that investment decisions were driven by a needs rather than a cost-saving logic because, as one interviewee put it, “we were on a war footing and people felt the immediate need to change things.” This also meant that the UK invested resources in implementing lessons learned (so that “as soon as the findings showed a key area [for action] it was operationalized”). Smaller, less costly iterations of this approach have been used to assess and reprogram smaller projects, as the OTI examples show. Here, too, the starting point for designing a system was its overarching objective, not the desire to limit costs.

In contrast, in some regions a number of actors invest smaller amounts to monitor conflict trends, often in the form of “one-off events, which are not repeated, or are repeated at erratic intervals with slightly different questions.”<sup>69</sup> This leads to duplication and, as one interviewee said, “a ton of waste” because the initiatives are not coordinated and resources are not pooled. Systems in other areas have seen investment pulled before their full potential could be realized because the political will to keep them going had changed. In one example shared by an interviewee, the UK was beginning to develop good monitoring systems in Syria, but when stabilization efforts there came to “an abrupt halt” so did efforts to measure local conflict trends, which had “irretrievable consequences” (not just for the reasons noted above but also because local analysis was lost).<sup>70</sup> Decisions like these can also have ramifications for the belief in local political analysis systems more generally. A poorly prepared and/or poorly managed system not only wastes money and causes additional work, it also undermines the case for local political analysis as a whole.

## 2. Lack of Clear Purpose and Strategic Direction

In some of the cases we examined for this study, the purpose of gathering and analyzing local information and the general strategic direction (that is, the purpose for which the data was to be used) were unclear over long periods of time. As a result, and unsurprisingly, that data was first collected at great expense only to be left unused. In drawing lessons from UNDP’s PAPEP system in Bolivia, Cale Salih noted: “Good analysis isn’t enough; how you use it matters just as much.”<sup>71</sup> No amount of local political knowledge will be useful unless decision-makers have a clear sense of what they intend to use it for. They must, then, define their goals from the outset and understand how the collection of data will support the pursuit of these goals. Unless this is the case, as one interviewee noted, these systems start to “look like a navel-gazing exercise” with “no concrete next steps.”

Of course, there is also a chicken-and-egg problem involved in setting a direction for information collection: as long as you don’t know what you don’t know, your questions will cling closely to your biases and preconceptions. It is therefore valid and necessary to regularly expand the collection of analysis beyond very narrowly defined interests that reflect a host of preexisting assumptions about a certain conflict. A degree of openness toward “hoovering up” any and all analysis is useful and even necessary, particularly in the early stages of a “new” intervention – if it has the clear purpose of understanding the lay of the land and defining what questions should be asked regularly

in order to take specific decisions for adapting one's programs. If data is being collected without a clear purpose or without the capacity to make sense of it, the result tends to be information overload without the necessary agility in programming.

Clear guidance can also drive up the standard for those undertaking the analysis and those translating it or packaging its results for decision-makers. The systems run by Germany's Stabilisation Platform for the Federal Foreign Office provide good examples at several levels: With a clear sense of what they wanted from the data to be collected on certain remote regions of the Sahel (in this case: a localized understanding of key conflict trends, including the quality of the social contract between the state and its people and the level of social resilience to inform stabilization investment), the team developed a clearer sense of what they needed the analysts to do. The tendering process requires researchers to be locally based, meaning that organizations based in capitals or flying in just to conduct research need to change their models to be eligible to apply. At a more granular stage, the Stabilisation Platform's specific guidance for key decisions on how to minimize both the diversion of aid from stabilization and resilience programs and unwanted political benefits for local extremist organizations in Syria have been revised every few years based on changing realities on the ground.

In other cases, goals changed or original goals became impossible to achieve without a revision that made sure that the local analysis being collected still served the new goals. In such cases, the time and resources invested into generating local analysis was not useful or effectively used. A case in point is the HMEP system in Helmand. When the project was initially developed, it was clear how the analysis that was collected supported the Helmand Plan goal to strengthen the social contract between civilians and local officials. However, when in 2014 the UK's main priority shifted to drawing down the number of British troops in Afghanistan, the evidence was suddenly at odds with what policymakers wanted to hear. The evidence showed that, rather than seeing a transfer of authority to increasingly capable local actors, Helmand province was becoming more unstable as the number of UK officials and forces was reduced. The UK government, however, was set on its course and thus became disinterested in the evidence from the ground, which became not just useless but a potential source of political embarrassment. There was the beginning of a discussion to shift the collection of data to better serve the new goals of withdrawal, but this was abandoned while a local political analysis system that had, at that point, become useless to its principal was maintained.

### 3. Accessibility and Applicability of Data for Decision-Making

In many cases, the new and uncommon demand to define what kinds of local political analysis should be collected has overshadowed another critical question: How can that data be processed, translated and presented to decision-makers in a way that works for them in achieving the overarching goal? In other words, how to make sure that they not only "know stuff" but make the necessary changes to their activities in a timely and efficient way? Donor governments, major multilateral organizations and other stabilization and peacebuilding actors hire expert analysts for their knowledge of the complex reality of local politics in a volatile conflict space, not because they are experts in the – equally complex but quite different – reality of political decision-making

in interventions. Sending the right data or analytical findings to decision-makers and presenting them in a digestible form is therefore a critical requirement for the success of any decision-support system.<sup>72</sup> A wealth of information that could provide rich nuance on the drivers of conflicts to many who work on these contexts gets lost in inaccessible spreadsheets or charts, while the latter only create new echo chambers for the small groups of contractors and officials (in donor state capitals or in conflict zones) who are actually engaging with these systems on a regular basis. This makes the entire investment in analysis useless if the goal is to improve strategy, direct diplomatic relationships or build a shared understanding among key stakeholders.

Making such data more accessible requires management, which needs to be done carefully. There is a danger that too much decision-making power is being outsourced to a third party of analysts whose information processing decisions could foreclose some decisions or nudge the formal decision-makers toward others, not even necessarily on purpose.<sup>73</sup> But this is far from inevitable: any analytically inclined institution – from foreign services to intelligence agencies and many others – has rich experience with well-designed aggregation methods and efforts to help decision-makers understand the data. Incidentally, doing so requires making that information more accessible than it currently is in many cases.

A key question to consider here is who will be tasked with translating the raw data into context-relevant analysis (and with making sure that people listen). A common factor in successful cases was designating certain people who were empowered with the time and necessary high-level support to ensure that the data was transmitted into the decision-making system. In the case of HMEP, it was only when the project team invested more in the targeted refinement and dissemination of its results (including by hiring an extra member of staff just to work on implementing the results of the analysis) that they found that the data was used by a much wider group of stakeholders.<sup>74</sup> The information was presented in a way that was accessible and easy to use for those that needed it, and members of the HMEP team also regularly presented their findings to key stakeholders to ensure they understood the data.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, the SPF's Monitoring and Analysis team in Germany was explicitly created to act as interpreter between analysts and political decision-makers. In doing so, they regularly review and revise their ways of presenting findings in digestible and useful formats to decision-makers. This translation work is not only resource-intensive, it also requires continuous and substantive engagement from decision-makers themselves. Consequently, in periods of massive understaffing on the policymaking side, decision-makers missed important changes in a local stabilization or peacebuilding context. Similarly, adjustments in the strategy of an intervention were not always translated into new analytical requirements. As a result, decision-makers became increasingly frustrated with a growing gap between their needs and what data they received (and how it was presented) – yet only by re-engaging with the analytic side and providing analysts with up-to-date strategic direction and translation requirements could they right the ship again.<sup>76</sup>

Translating policy goals into concrete requirements for useful local political analysis and engaging with the respective findings requires day-to-day strategic direction. The part that is often outsourced to implementers or third-party monitors works only as well as the in-house capacity on the side of donors to provide that strategic direction and process analytical findings. Beyond ensuring actionable data and a



helpful presentation, this too has often been a chicken-and-egg problem: a lack of staff for steering analytical systems and processing the findings leaves valuable information unused. As a result, there is less and less feedback on the information, which makes analysts lose touch with decision-making needs. And again, not only does this make local information gathering a pointless exercise – more importantly, without a proper information and knowledge basis, interventions in sensitive conflict contexts become dangerously irresponsible and could do more harm than good.

#### 4. Lack of Adaptive, Flexible Programming

Frequent, granular political analysis and an adaptive approach to running stabilization and peacebuilding programs are two sides of the same coin: neither exists without the other, or at least neither is a responsible endeavor, has a chance of succeeding and is worth its money without the other. Rigid two-year work plans with predetermined activities create, as one interviewee called it, “cruise ship” policies – courses of action that are hard to alter and adapt. The consequence of this planning approach is that there is no space and flexibility for international actors to change their policies and programs in a conflict-affected context based on information they receive from local political analysis systems.

Fortunately, the need to move away from these cruise-ship approaches is slowly being recognized. The UN Peacebuilding Fund now “recognizes that (...) piloting new approaches requires faster feedback loops to enable adaptive programming and applying lessons, including those derived from failure.”<sup>77</sup> The same is true in the UK: CSSF’s annual report noted that there needed to be “experimental approaches to ‘fail fast’, learn lessons and continue to iterate.” Germany’s white paper *Shaping stabilisation* states that “initial measures are then explicitly merely an interim step, integrated into an overall strategic framework that focuses on the long term and is continually refined.”<sup>78</sup> However, the record of actually translating this recognition into different approaches to programming has been patchy. Even where improvements have been made, cultural barriers endure: grantees may feel that they cannot actually change project plans, and donors may be reluctant to invest time and resources into changing course.

This is a shame, because all the good-practice examples highlighted to us in interviews had some degree of built-in flexibility that enabled those in charge to react to findings from local political analysis. For instance, USAID/OTI uses flexible work plans that enable teams to develop strategies iteratively, based on the learnings that emerge from local political analysis. This also filters down to how OTI operates at the country level. We heard from staff working in OTI country offices about so-called pause-and-reflect meetings which provide space for in-country officials to engage with what they are learning and think about how to adapt. German’s AKM also has such processes in place to facilitate learning and discussion about good practices that enable the further development of systems and allow for adaptation wherever needed and useful. These examples, unfortunately, were the exception. More likely, practitioners found that they were unable to adapt strategies and policies quickly enough to react to the evidence they received.

This was compounded by siloed ways of working in departments.<sup>79</sup> The potential of local analysis systems to help improve *shared* working was often undermined by the fact that larger divisions between departments meant that the implementation of policy changes based on findings from local analysis was rarely a whole-of-government effort. Unless – as was the case for HMEP – staff or departments were specifically tasked with implementing lessons learned from these systems, such knowledge was often lost in the day-to-day vortex of tasks faced by overworked officials.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## A Step-By-Step Guide to Closing the Gap

The wealth of information gathered by local analysis systems has the potential to dramatically improve planning, implementation and learning in stabilization and peacebuilding interventions. Put differently, more adaptive and agile stabilization and peacebuilding practices – a key requirement for achieving impact and minimizing unintended harmful consequences – demand that funders leverage the potential of effective local political analysis. The past and current experiments and pilots we reviewed for the purposes of this study have confirmed this significant promise of local analysis to make a critical contribution to future stabilization and peacebuilding efforts. It is time to integrate this instrument into the standard toolkit for effective, responsible stabilization and peacebuilding. While it may not be equally necessary to compile such granular local knowledge everywhere, it is no longer sufficient to treat local analysis as experimental or relevant only for a tiny number of extreme cases.

At the very least, individual donors and major multilateral intermediaries should prioritize conflict contexts where local political analysis systems are most urgently needed and design tailored solutions that account for the specific needs in each situation. This is particularly important where there is a “triple gap” in community-level political awareness, that is, where: (1) the operating environment or a key part of it is remote, dangerous and volatile; (2) existing sources of actionable and reliable political analysis do not suffice; and (3) the international institution itself has an important stake in steering the joint international intervention to maximize impact and/or minimize unintended effects.

In such areas, past experiences indicate what is needed to make sure local political analysis can improve decision-making. In Afghanistan, Syria, the Sahel, Somalia, Libya, Ukraine, Honduras, and Bolivia, these systems were more effective than in other contexts because they: saw sufficient and consistent resources in both financial and staff terms; were designed for a clear purpose; made sure that decision-makers received actionable information that answered their needs; and were accompanied by implementation processes with clear ownership of tasks and investments (with flexible work plans to adapt to changes).

Despite the differences between these contexts, our interviews all highlighted a set of shared concerns that can inform the design of future systems of local political analysis. They are the foundations of our recommendations, which we present below as a step-by-step guide to setting up and using effective local political analysis for adaptive stabilization and peacebuilding.

## 1. Tailor (and Resource) Local Political Analysis Systems as Part of an Intervention

The first step to designing a local political analysis system should be to take a holistic view of the intervention it is supposed to serve and determine the investment it requires. Assessing the desired impact that the overall stabilization or peacebuilding effort or its particular programs should have on community-level conflict dynamics in remote, violent spaces is the key starting point for tailoring the scope of a local political analysis system. If achieving the overall strategic goal of the stabilization or peacebuilding intervention requires such local-level impact, some kind of local political analysis will be needed to get there.

However, such a system will only be effective if it is sufficiently resourced for a clearly defined purpose, and if its outputs are used by decision-makers and fed into adaptive programming. The actual price tag of ‘sufficient resources’ will depend on the context, the purpose and the requirements for making different analytical products actionable for the policymakers who steer the adaptive programs. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for that. Instead, our analysis of existing local political analysis systems leads us to the conclusion that the only effective way getting it right is by designing local analysis systems together with the programs they serve – in other words, they must be an integral part (and, financially speaking, a percentage) of the total stabilization or peacebuilding investment. This might mean one, two, five or ten percent of an overall intervention budget – but again, success in building such a system means that the other 90 to 99 percent of funding are much more likely to yield the desired impact. It is not economical to minimize the cost of monitoring and analysis. On the contrary, the reasonable thing to do is to optimize this investment – and the more challenging the context and the more ambitious the overall intervention, the more likely it is that a relatively expensive monitoring system will be required.

If first-party analysis – i.e., a fully integrated multilateral mission which observes local politics and uses those insights for its own adaptive decision-making – is not possible, third-party analysis systems are usually the best way forward. Second-party approaches will probably not meet the requirement of reliability, even if access to the required information is possible and second-party analysts could provide actionable analysis. Moreover, given the challenges of mandating such missions, effective and fully integrated multilateral stabilization and peacebuilding interventions will likely become rarer. Against this background, international stabilization and peacebuilding actors are best advised to rely on third-party local political analysis if they want to avoid the “triple analytical gap” and instead receive information that meets all the three critical criteria we identified: coverage of all the important local spaces and data that is reliable and actionable for decision-making. It is no accident that the types of spaces that remain most often in the dark when it comes to local analysis are also the areas where small-scale, community-level and agile programming is particularly critical if international actors want to have a positive impact.

## 2. Define Strategic Goals, Analytical Indicators and Decision-Making Mechanisms

Along with making sure they have clarity about the goals and adaptive mechanisms of the intervention itself (outlined, for instance, in a country, subnational or regional

strategy), it is key that decision-makers clearly define how the evidence from local political analysis will help to achieve these goals. This should encompass interim steps, meaning a clear sense of how local evidence will serve to support the key milestones that are necessary for achieving longer-term goals.

What kinds of data on the local political dynamics in an area of interest must be collected – and at what intervals? How does it need to be processed and presented so that those in charge of an intervention can act on local information in a timely manner and make effective changes to their programs? Decision-making can only be driven by such evidence if there is room to iteratively adjust courses of action to the findings of local political analysis. This, in turn, requires flexible work plans that give space to adapt strategies and programs.

Any data or analysis is useful only to the extent that it informs decisions. Put differently, any data gathering effort that does not address the needs of decision-makers is wasted. However, as already mentioned, the necessary granularity of local political analysis threatens to overwhelm decision-makers working at the strategy level with micro data. To avoid such information overload, it is key to:

- Develop suitable and accessible formats for aggregating, visualizing and presenting information to those who drive an intervention’s strategy;
- Pencil in real-time interactions (meetings, video conferences, etc.) between analysts and decision-makers at critical points in the decision cycle to ensure that the necessary exchange on what the information means and how it can be used takes place;
- Ensure the necessary buy-in from senior leadership (for example, managers within the hierarchy of ministries) and support day-to-day ‘champions’ who are tasked with translating the data into political choices and ensuring that it is read, understood and used by the people who need it.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, when the overarching goals of an intervention change there needs to be a reassessment of whether the local political analysis system still serves them or if it needs updating.

### 3. Assign Clear Ownership Over Who Does What

When it comes to setting up local political analysis systems for stabilization and peacebuilding purposes, there are five key questions that need answering. The answers themselves will likely differ for every country or regional context and/or donor.

- **Who controls the system as a whole?** This could be a single donor organization or control could take the form of some kind of joint mechanism between like-minded organizations sharing the cost and analysis, for example.
- **Who collects the data?** Many alternatives are conceivable here, depending on the information requirements, political and security considerations, timelines, and the overall scope and size of the analysis system.

- **Who analyzes the data?** This is about who provides the key assessments in ways that are actually suited to support the decisions that local political analysis needs to inform.
- **Who translates the data into actionable information?** At both the organizational and the individual level, there needs to be a clear sense of who will ensure that those in charge can easily interpret the information they receive.
- **Who decides based on the evidence?** It must be clear who makes the final decision to adapt a program or change other kinds of policy action (both at a strategic level and more in terms of an intervention's day-to-day implementation) based on new evidence. The same holds true when it comes to who makes sure to adapt the local monitoring itself in case the context or objectives change. The latter is particularly important if control over the system is shared between different organizations.

These questions should be considered based on the specifics of each intervention, its local context, the political requirements for steering it, and the donor country's national interests in the region. The answers can lead to vastly different local political analysis systems, both in terms of scope and how a system actually works. These design parameters and the structural and process choices that follow from them should be reviewed on a regular basis, as the system needs to respond to changes in the local context in the same way that the programs must adapt.

#### 4. Invest the Staff and Financial Resources Needed to Actually Use the Data

Local political analysis does not just cost whatever the budget of the external entity that decides to procure such data. The in-house staff capacity to translate community-level political observations into actionable information, to take key decisions for steering the overall intervention, and to manage the continuous review and adaptation of the local political analysis system itself (meaning its goals, analytical requirements or indicators, processing and product design, etc.) all need to be factored into the calculation as well.

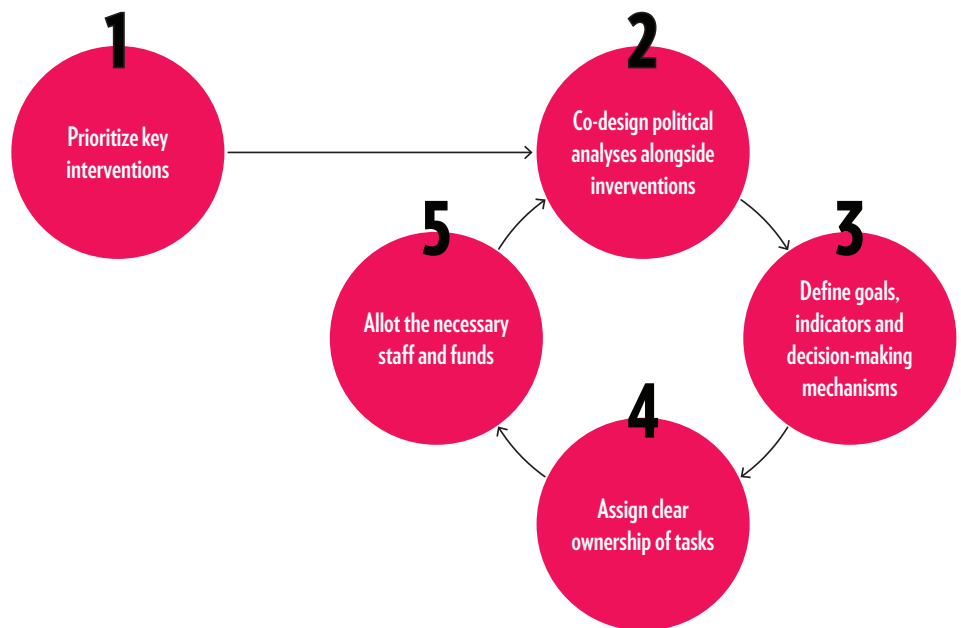
A tailor-made local political analysis system takes time to build – and it must be improved iteratively to meet decision-makers' changing needs as precisely as possible, despite the practical limitations posed by the remoteness, violence and political volatility of the spaces being analyzed. Contractors and local partners will only develop the necessary commitment to this process if given some medium-term perspective. Therefore, setting up a system of this kind requires a consistent funding perspective beyond a short pilot phase. Funding should not just focus on the collection of information but also on how the data and outputs will be made accessible to others who could benefit from it to improve their strategy.

At the point of calculating the necessary resources, the strategic logic of matching the means to the ends (meaning the goals or requirements) of local political analysis is often depicted as a step-by-step approach to resourcing but should actually be conceived of as a cycle (see Figure 5 below). The system will only work if the means fit the ends and vice versa, and if the two are kept in sync even as the context, the intervention and

the needs or expectations for local political analysis change. The ultimate benchmark for economy in decision-support systems such as initial context analysis, continuous local political monitoring or, for that matter, classical monitoring and evaluation is the extent to which these systems contribute to the success of the entire investment.

For stabilization and peacebuilding endeavors in complex conflict environments, effective local political analysis can make the difference between flying half blind and accepting massive risks of wasteful or inadvertently harmful spending, or acquiring the ability to steer an adaptive program that translates the upfront investment into more effective and efficient impact and meets standard do-no-harm requirements. Dedicating a small percentage of the total investment in a conflict intervention to making the entire engagement more targeted and more fit to manage key risks is prudent, responsible policy. In some cases, this also means that it only takes a very small effort and in-house capacity to put in place an ad-hoc initial system, which can then be scaled up if needed. Where this is not the case, or if a donor country cannot foot the bill alone, it should consider pooling resources and building a shared system with other likeminded actors.

Figure 5: A Step-by-Step Guide to Setting Up and Using Effective Local Political Analysis Systems



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