

How to make the comprehensive approach work

Preparation at home is key to effective crisis management in the field

“To be effective across the crisis management spectrum, we will enhance integrated civilian-military planning throughout the crisis spectrum, (...) identify and train civilian specialists from member states (...) able to work alongside our military personnel and civilian specialists from partner countries and institutions.”

This quote from the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept outlines the leitmotiv of current crisis management: an increasing number of various civilian and military actors working side by side. Indeed, for more than a decade, the international community has been committed to what it calls comprehensive crisis management to reach sustainable conflict transformation, be it in Afghanistan, the Balkans or Somalia. States and international organisations alike preach joined-up civil-military approaches, require joint missions from the UN and expect NATO to better cooperate with civilian organisations. However, while this idea of linking various tools in a common approach to address today’s multifaceted crises is in theory convincing, its track record leaves room for improvement. This is reason for concern, especially in view of old missions running to an end (Afghanistan), and a range of new missions emerging on the horizon or already starting (Sudan, Somalia, Libya). If the international community wants to use the potential it has to support particularly the early phases of stabilisation and peacebuilding, it has to rethink its approach in view of considerably improving the coordination of the tools at hand and the actors involved. The key to success can to a great extent be found at home. Civilian, police and military actors, as well as the diplomatic, development and humanitarian communities need to further operationalise the concept of the comprehensive approach through adequate mission preparation, training and appropriated structures in mission administration.

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International crisis management has changed in three dimensions over the past decades. First, the spectrum of tasks has expanded. If traditional peace-keeping focused on containing military escalation, contemporary crisis management aims to deal with

the security, social, political, and economic dimensions of a crisis to reach a comprehensive and sustainable conflict transformation. Consequently, there is a wide range of tasks that comprises humanitarian aid as well as assuring security or ensuring the rule of law.

Second, the timelines of crisis management have expanded. Activities span today from hot stabilization to conflict prevention; the actual crisis management; up to post-conflict peacebuilding and can take several years, up to decades.

Third, the number of actors involved has increased. This is partly due to the broadened spectrum of tasks, which require specific instruments and expertise that no single actor can supply. Moreover, actors from the crisis region, such as the government or relevant forces from neighbouring regions, become increasingly involved. Their ownership in conflict resolution is central to ensuring its sustainability.

Due to this expansion of tasks, timelines and actors, and the enhanced interaction of actors and tasks, the complexity of crisis management has increased tremendously. Crisis management has, in fact, become foremost complexity management. The internal and external coordination of all available instruments and actors, their timely and appropriate deployment in the various conflict phases, and the definition of common mission objectives have become of paramount importance for reaching a sustainable crisis response. This is what the “Comprehensive Approach” is about. It reinvigorates the way crisis responses should be planned and carried out in view of enhancing both its efficiency and legitimacy by coordinating the interaction and interdependence of tasks and actors involved. Cooperation must be coordinated between civilian and military players as much as between different civilian actors (such as humanitarian aid and diplomacy) or military ones (such as the armed forces of different countries or organisations).

The problem with the Comprehensive Approach

However, the record of the comprehensive approach so far remains ambiguous. Those missions that sought to apply it all seem to suffer, quite ironically, from a lack of coordination, interaction and cooperation between the civilian, military and police components. Almost all actors involved express their frustration, claiming that they have been inadequately prepared to deal with each other, and that the structures of interaction were inappropriate. While states and the international community have made attempts, over the last decade, to improve their interaction, such as through the set up of national interministerial coordination structures (Germany, UK), concepts

(France, Netherlands) or processes, such as integrated planning processes (UN, EU), they haven't been able to overcome these problems. Two major problems persist: conceptual shortfalls and inappropriate preparation.

First, the absence of a conceptual basis

While most states, international organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) acknowledge the necessity for better coordination, their approaches diverge significantly regarding priorities, means and end-states. Furthermore, civilian, police and military actors use different terms, or may act on the basis of different principles.

Commonly defined goals and coordination often exist only in general terms; there is rarely a coherent framework that would specify crisis management objectives, division of tasks and resources in a specific mission. Those involved, whether governments or organisations, therefore rely on an implicit consensus. This puts a high premium on strong coordination authorities both at home and in the field or good ad-hoc personal relationships.

In addition, many concepts, aside from NATO and the UN, have to date been predominantly targeted at internal coordination, that is, within the players' own structures. Coordination with external actors, whether (local) governments, international organisations or NGOs, is just as important, however, for effective crisis management.

The lack of conceptual clarity and the coexistence of different guiding principles at the national and international levels is confusing, exacerbates communication and cooperation and eventually limits the prospects for common action.

Second, inadequate preparation

Although most actors agree that coordinated interaction in the field is crucial for successful crisis management, they hardly prepare for it at home. Adequate preparation includes both: understanding the way of doing things of the other, as well as effectively training with the other. In particular, it is important to recognise the limits of coordination. An example can be found with regard to some humanitarian organisations, who avoid cooperation with the military and police in order not to compromise their objectives, reputation and working conditions. It is unfortunate

that sometimes these limitations are realized only once in mission, when time pressure and a myriad of challenges inhibit and complicate solutions.

While some states and organisations have set up joint training courses, such as Sweden and Germany, they remain the exception, and not all actors participate. There are hardly joint exercises where all actors involved train for interaction in the field. However, it is no rocket science to conclude that it would be useful to investigate the opportunities and limits for cooperation prior to the launch of an operation. This would require a type of exercise that mirrors a mission setting, with a representative sample of actors. While the military are capable of, and used to, developing such exercises, their civilian counterparts are less attuned to and equipped for such methods.

These findings are confirmed in the evaluation of a multinational and multi-organisational exercise, called “Common Effort”, which aimed to train various actors for comprehensive crisis management. This exercise, one of the rare examples of its sort, was organised in 2010/11 by the German and Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and the 1st German-Dutch Army Corps. It involved a broad range of actors, ranging from the police to military, diplomats to development agency representatives, intergovernmental and multilateral organisations and NGOs. Some of the key lessons are telling: There is a lack of joint ownership over issues related to the longer term goals; information sharing does not equate to joint planning and setting joint objectives; leadership in coordination is not appreciated.

In particular, the exercise pointed to the need to better understand the challenge of how to marry the short-term goals of the military with the medium to long-term objectives of most civilian actors. It also underlined that some NGOs have clear red lines. Rather than training how to deepen cooperation with the military, the NGOs used the opportunity to emphasize that there are limits to such kind of cooperation and that the military need to learn to respect these limits when seeking cooperation. Besides, it underscored that the interaction among the various civilian actors proved to be as thorny as that between civilians and the military. Not new in itself, the lessons from Common Effort clearly suggested strengthening the roles of the development actor’s perspective, the police and NGOs and the need to focus not only on the national (central government)

level but also on the level of provincial and local governmental actors.

Nevertheless, despite these ambiguous results, experience from both this exercise and previous missions suggest not so much that the concept of a comprehensive approach is flawed. It rather suggests that it needs to be thought through and planned for in a more thorough way, in order to avoid the pitfall and shortfalls of recent operational experiences. For to keep on failing to manage the complexity of crisis management will undermine the legitimacy and the effectiveness of the commitment of the international community, and puts its security and stability at risk. Recent developments such as in North Africa underscore that we will need attention of some sort at some point, be it for reasons of responsibility to protect, or reasons of potential fall-out of destabilisation.

How to improve the implementation of comprehensive crisis management

A first step towards more effective joined up working is to recognise that there is no general replicable model for successful crisis management; contexts are too different. The risk being a lesson well known to the military: not to prepare the next war on the basis of the previous one. In terms of crisis management, this implies that while Afghanistan has provided important lessons for joined up working in the 3D domain (diplomacy, defence and development), it has limited value for missions in an African context, or for that matter the MENA region, South Sudan or Somalia. The combination of having to (re)build a state whilst fighting terrorist cells and insurgents, addressing the issue of narcotics in a setting with very active regional involvement, has resulted in an approach geared towards the Afghan context, yet that is not likely to reoccur elsewhere.

The earlier referred to exercise, Common Effort, confirms these findings. It may not have been the intention of the organisers, but by transplanting the Afghan experience (in terms of structures and a large number of Afghan mission veterans) to the context of a hypothetical African country, the lesson was learned early on in the exercise that applying the Afghan model one-on-one does not work. However, it also revealed those elements of the Afghan experience that are of a more general guidance nature.

The absence of a general model, thus, does not imply that there are no lessons to be learned to guide new missions. Comprehensive training prior to deployment, joint planning or a better understanding of the organisational culture of the partner have been identified as enabling tools. In fact, instead of preparing for a precise situation, the challenge is to develop and train general skills and expertise that can be applied, and structures, concepts and resources that be used in a broad range of settings. The resulting improved coordination and preparation at the national level will allow ameliorating the interaction in the crisis region where one will have to coordinate with various international actors.

What the key actors involved can do

Governments and other key actors should concentrate on the following areas to improve the implementation of a comprehensive approach:

- **Assure Real Joint Planning, Programming and Monitoring**

Cooperation that begins only in the field has very little room for manoeuvre. All those who want to be involved need to arrive at an improved common understanding of the problem already at the planning stage, in order to achieve strategic agreement on the division of labour and coordination. Departments of ministries, international organisations or NGOs should develop clear points of contact and establish binding exchange procedures with internal and external partners in their planning processes.

This is not a technical exercise of just organising a couple of meetings with different stakeholders in a mission. Nor is it about sharing information. Joint planning, programming and monitoring is about identifying joint objectives and how to plan for them together, as a group and with clear lead agents in different stages. This requires a joint analysis and understanding of the challenges and how to deal with them. In particular, the joint understanding of the challenges and how to address them on the short, medium and longer term, would benefit from a *theory of change* that all involved key actors share and that can help to identify and understand roles, added value and responsibilities of the different actors.

Having this agreed narrative of change in mind will facilitate discussing the various steps in the process of change and towards an exit strategy of the various actors. The latter is of importance, since the timeline

and the related objectives of one actor may not necessarily coincide with that of others. An agreed understanding of how to achieve the various goals and how to avoid negative fallout of decisions of individual actors where possible is therefore key to achieve a clear prioritisation of activities and a clear division of labour (which may differ per phase of a mission).

The suggested approach based on a theory of change will help fight the challenge to just produce results quickly and will allow keeping a focus on the desired medium to longer-term outcomes or impact.

- **Better preparation for the mission's participants**

Joint planning and action require a better understanding of the organisational cultures of the partners. For governmental departments and divisions of international organisations the solution would be to set up (or re-energise existing) inter-ministerial committees that meet on a regular basis, exchange staff with one another and provide joint training courses and instruction, also outside a mission. Human resources policies could be geared towards to better training and positioning of posting staff, be it inside their own organisation or through secondments. NGOs should be associated if they desire so. This then should ensure a constant flow of information and enable for mutual understanding of working methods and decision-making processes, by creating tighter coordination and a greater willingness to cooperate. Ideally, it may lead to guidelines, or even a 'handbook' from which guidelines and suggestions for action can be drawn and that could be used for separate of joint training of staff.

Such training has to be as comprehensive and joined up as possible. Regular exercises would offer the litmus test whether the measures are appropriated. The exercise Common Effort, for instance, has provided a wide range of civilian, military and police actors with an opportunity to test various approaches of working together without endangering a real-life mission. It has enhanced mutual understanding of what an integrated mission entails, and also the various challenges that still need to be addressed. In organizing this type of exercise more often, the various actors involved may not only get to know each other before they enter the crisis situation, but they will also better understand the way of thinking and acting of their counterparts without being distrustful.

There is however a limit to governmental action: most of the civilian actors are non-governmental and might hence not wish to take part in state-organised training measures.

• Developing crisis-specific approaches

Experiences have shown that an overarching concept that embraces all actors involved is difficult to implement: each crisis is different. Instead, different crisis-specific comprehensive approaches are needed. These would need to define the core processes of crisis management (such as DDR or SSR) as well as the duties and areas of responsibility of individual players at each stage of a conflict, or in each activity. What might be required is a more sequenced approach that focuses on synchronisation and clear leadership per phase.

• Recognising limits of the comprehensive approach

Coordination is not an end in itself. Anyone wanting to operate strategy-compliant crisis management needs to recognise that there is a whole spectrum of interaction reaching from integration and close cooperation to coordination and administration of the division of labour up to sole coexistence. Comprehensive approaches are not a universal remedy in crisis management and should not be used for their own sake. Peaceful coexistence might sometimes be more effective to reach the objectives of a mission than forced cooperation.

The often used quote “we need coordination, but nobody wants to be coordinated” is telling. A mission is about achieving objectives, not about achieving the comprehensive approach. It should be an enabling, not an obstructing tool. Whereas coordination is necessary, it should be avoided to introduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

Further reading

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- On Common Effort:
 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSwlsNlPOro&list=UUp2wwfExTflpzPoAoZW-7kQ&index=12&feature=plcp
 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=6O7rs-Is1hA&feature=BFa&list=UUp2wwfExTflpzPoAoZW-7kQ&lf=plcp

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The Clingendael Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a training and research organization on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team, focusing on conflict-related issues in developing countries.

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