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## **Saferworld response to the Building Stability Overseas Strategy**

### **Introduction**

Saferworld strongly welcomes the publication of the Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS). For the first time, the UK has a cross-departmental strategy to promote conflict prevention, security and justice globally. This represents a major step forward and sets an example of coherent, whole-of-government approaches that should be followed elsewhere.

There is much to commend in the BSOS. Firstly, it is important that the strategy has adopted a fundamentally political understanding of 'stability' which emphasises the need for 'political systems which are representative and legitimate...and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met ...[and]...opportunities for...development are open to all'. This is a striking contrast to seeing stability simply as the absence of any immediate likelihood of violence, which can sometimes serve to entrench a 'negative peace' and/or to the unexpected collapse of superficially 'stable' regimes.

Secondly, the BSOS reaffirms the UK Government's commitment to upstream conflict prevention, and provides more detail about what this investment will look like in practice. As the strategy itself states, upstream conflict prevention is morally right, ultimately saves lives and money, and is in the UK's long-term interests.

Thirdly, the strategy emphasises throughout the importance of 'legitimate and effective institutions', and goes into considerable detail on what this involves. This includes strong recognition that 'security and justice matter'. Support to improve security and access to justice must be appropriate, however, and Saferworld welcomes the focus on accountable, legitimate institutions that respect human rights.

This briefing outlines Saferworld's initial response to the BSOS. A more detailed response will follow in the near future, and Saferworld looks forward to discussing the strategy, the development of implementation plans and associated initiatives such as the Defence Engagement Strategy, with both HMG and non-governmental actors in the coming weeks.

### **Good quality analysis is critical for early warning**

The high-level commitment to early warning is welcome. In Saferworld's experience, effective early warning depends on two steps: a) generating high-quality analysis that offers genuine insights into conflict dynamics; and b) translating the signals produced by the early warning system into appropriate 'early' action.

In seeking to improve the UK's early warning analysis and response capacity via the BSOS, HMG should seek to:

- maintain a balance between intra-state conflict (the main focus of BSOS), inter-state conflict and related cross-border and regional dimensions in the implementation of HMG's commitment to early warning
- ensure that welcome efforts to improve mid- to long-term analysis, such as the proposed six-

month Watchlist and Annual Horizon Scan should complement, and be complemented by other sources of information and intelligence to better enable HMG to understand longer-term trends

- further articulate the distinction between triggers and drivers of instability and conflict; reconciling the current primary focus on 'sudden shocks' with the need to give attention to the underlying, long-term factors within and between societies that can create, catalyse and fuel conflicts; and further developing thinking on the importance of transnational and global drivers of conflict.

## **Managing transitions between the 'pillars'**

The three-pillared structure appears sensible and appropriate. HMG now faces the challenge of co-ordinating and prioritising its response across the pillars. Maintaining a focus on longer-term, upstream prevention will have to be balanced with responding to pressing short-term demands under BSOS. HMG will need to consider how to manage transitions from early warning to early response and from rapid interventions to longer-term upstream prevention. The role of the BSOS Steering Board will be fundamental in ensuring continuity and balance between the pillars in order to get the best long-term returns – sustainable peace and security – from UK efforts to build stability overseas.

## **Promoting stability through state-society relations**

The definition of stability in the BSOS recognises that genuine, sustainable security can only be achieved when the state is legitimate, protects individuals' human rights and provides basic services. It thus emphasises the importance of healthy state-society relations. However, it is less clear about how external actors can support this in practice.

The emphasis on 'legitimate and effective institutions' shows that HMG recognises the risks of providing too much 'capacity building' support to states and that a balance is required with support for actions to strengthen accountability and transparency. There are several references in the strategy to working with and supporting parliaments, non-governmental organisations and other civil society actors, all of which is positive.

Saferworld recommends that HMG further emphasises the importance of defending and strengthening the opportunities for the public to hold their states to account and reflects this emphasis in the development of its BSOS implementation plans.

## **Tackling local politics – including spoilers**

The BSOS rightly rejects 'technical fixes' (paragraph 5.4) and is clear about the importance of diplomacy. However, it is not direct enough in acknowledging that building stability overseas is a *fundamentally political endeavour* that goes to the heart of politics – the monopoly (or otherwise) of violence – in the states in which external actors intervene. This is never truer than when working on security and justice provision.

Ironically, given that the BSOS still primarily sees stability through a state-centric lens, the strategy has little to say about the challenges of working with states in conflict-affected and fragile states. It needs to be recognised that in such circumstances, a proportion of the elite – often including those with formal power within the state – are invested in the status quo and do not necessarily want peace and stability, or not on the same terms as HMG. Dealing with the politics is thus absolutely critical to all aspects of international engagement.

## **'Across-the-board' conflict sensitivity**

Donors have increasingly adopted the language of conflict sensitivity in recent years, and its inclusion in BSOS is a positive step. However, it does not acknowledge that *all* actions in a context must be conflict-sensitive. Paragraph 6.5 lists out many aspects of the UK's engagement overseas in terms of its 'capabilities', including diplomacy, development, defence engagement and trade. These must all be working in tandem to promote peace; a peacebuilding strategy can be fatally undermined by inappropriate arms transfers, for example, or by trade deals that strengthen one party to a conflict at

the expense of another. There should therefore be a commitment to ensuring that *all* HMG engagement in conflict-affected countries is conflict-sensitive both as individual interventions and 'in the round.' The 'shared integrated strategy' and the 'UK strategies for key countries and regions' referred to in paragraphs 9.1 and 9.3 are the obvious vehicle for this.

Appropriate controls over arms exports are thus particularly relevant in this regard, and Saferworld strongly welcomes the reference to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) under Paragraph 10.12. It is hoped that the UK will play a leading role in negotiations to ensure that an ATT is adopted that truly regulates the arms market and improves the security of those who are most vulnerable. Paragraph 7.6 also suggests that materials generated under BSOS 'could usefully inform the Department for Business Innovation and Skills' work on export licensing'. Saferworld agrees and believes that the analysis generated through Early Warning should have a formal role in the risk assessment process for decisions on export licenses.

## **Making it happen: Operationalising these commitments**

Lastly, Section 11, 'Making this happen', contains a number of steps towards implementing the BSOS. However, reference to the demands on resources, staffing and skills is notable by its absence. As Saferworld has highlighted before,<sup>1</sup> truly *operationalising* the commitments to upstream conflict prevention, security and justice and early warning and action will require major changes in how HMG staff are recruited, trained, resourced, supported, managed and incentivised – and how they interact with a broad range of local, national and international actors. This should therefore be recognised within the strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Now for how: Turning commitments into action, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/resources/view-resource/408>