



POLICY PAPER · ASPC-PP-002

Institutional Stability and Public Confidence

Administrative capability, continuity, and the foundations of trusted cooperation.

ASPC POLICY PAPER

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Purpose

This paper proposes a practical definition of institutional stability and identifies questions that ASPC and participating institutions could use when examining public administration, continuity, and confidence.

Executive summary

Institutional stability is the capacity to perform legitimate functions reliably, adapt lawfully, and preserve public confidence through change.

Stability should not be confused with the absence of disagreement or institutional change. Capable institutions evolve. They replace ineffective procedures, respond to new risks, and transfer leadership without abandoning their public responsibilities.

This paper identifies five connected dimensions: lawful authority, operational capability, administrative continuity, information integrity, and public accountability. Weakness in any dimension may affect economic confidence, service delivery, and the reliability of international cooperation.

Stable institutions are not static institutions. They are institutions capable of responsible change.

The proposed approach emphasizes practical assessment rather than broad rankings. Institutions should be examined in relation to the functions they are expected to perform and the conditions under which they operate.

Understanding institutional stability

An institution is stable when stakeholders can reasonably expect it to exercise legitimate authority, maintain essential functions, keep reliable records, administer resources responsibly, and respond to foreseeable disruption.

Lawful authority

Responsibilities and limits are understood, documented, and exercised through legitimate processes.

Operational capability

People, systems, resources, and leadership are sufficient for assigned functions.

Continuity

Essential work can continue through leadership transition, emergency, or external pressure.

Information integrity

Decisions rely on accurate records, appropriate evidence, and correction mechanisms.

Accountability

Performance and stewardship can be examined by the appropriate authorities and public.

Adaptability

Procedures can change without abandoning institutional purpose or lawful responsibility.

Common analytical error

Observers may focus on formal structure while overlooking the operating systems through which decisions are implemented. An institution may possess extensive legal authority yet lack procurement capability, technical staff, records, or continuity planning.

Capability and public confidence

Public confidence is not produced by communication alone. It develops when experience demonstrates that an institution behaves predictably, treats people fairly, corrects error, and uses authority for legitimate purposes.

Economic relevance

Households and enterprises make long-term decisions when administrative requirements are understandable and commitments can be relied upon. Unpredictable licensing, procurement, taxation, customs, or dispute resolution increases cost and discourages responsible participation.

International relevance

International partners require credible counterparts. Cooperation becomes fragile when responsibilities change without notice, records cannot be located, or commitments depend entirely on individual relationships. Institutional capability converts personal access into durable cooperation.

Confidence under pressure

Emergency conditions reveal whether authority, continuity, information, and communication have been prepared in advance. Institutions should document essential functions, delegated authority, critical dependencies, backup systems, and public communication responsibilities.

Trust is strengthened when an institution can explain what it knows, what it does not know, what it is authorized to do, and how it will correct error.

Proposed assessment framework

Question	Indicative evidence
Is the mandate clear?	Law, charter, delegation, published responsibilities, decision records.
Can essential functions be performed?	Staffing, skills, operating procedures, systems, budget, service data.
Can work survive transition?	Records, succession, delegated authority, continuity plans, backup capability.
Are decisions supportable?	Evidence standards, review, data quality, correction and appeal processes.
Are resources responsibly managed?	Budget controls, procurement records, audit, conflict procedures.
Can performance be examined?	Published measures, oversight, feedback, complaint and response systems.

Assessment principles

- Evaluate functions, not institutional reputation alone.
- Use multiple evidence sources and distinguish fact from perception.
- Involve people who operate and depend upon the institution.
- Account for law, resources, risk, and local conditions.
- Prioritize a limited number of remediable weaknesses.

Proposed policy considerations

1 Protect essential functions first

Identify functions whose interruption would create the greatest public, economic, or institutional harm.

2 Invest in operating systems

Leadership development should be matched by records, procurement, data, staffing, and continuity capability.

3 Strengthen lawful adaptability

Create procedures for delegated authority, emergency action, review, and restoration of normal practice.

4 Measure public experience

Combine administrative data with feedback from people and institutions that rely upon the service.

5 Communicate limits accurately

Avoid promises beyond authority or capability and disclose material uncertainty.

Capability requires evidence, controls, and continuity

Federal oversight supports a functional view of institutional stability: can an institution manage risk, perform, learn, and sustain results?

GAO's review of government-to-government assistance found detailed fiduciary risk assessments were completed when required, but mitigation actions were not always carried into planning documents. Audits were often late, reducing their usefulness for timely follow-up. Monitoring plans rarely contained measures that directly tested capacity, ownership, or sustainability.

In a broader foreign-assistance review, GAO concluded that OMB guidance included 23 of 28 identified monitoring and evaluation practices. The omitted practices included risk-based monitoring plans, qualified monitoring staff, closeout procedures, evaluation skill development, and mechanisms to follow up recommendations.

ASPC finding

Formal authority and initial risk assessment are insufficient if mitigations are not owned, scheduled, tested, and closed. Institutional capability should therefore be assessed across the complete operating cycle—not at authorization alone.

A control that is documented but not integrated into implementation is not yet an operating capability.

The cited GAO work assessed particular U.S. foreign-assistance policies and samples. ASPC's broader institutional interpretation is an inference, clearly separated from GAO's conclusions.

Revised diagnostic

Operating question	Verification	Warning sign
Are risks connected to action?	Named owner, mitigation, due date, residual-risk review.	Assessment completed after planning or held separately.
Are outcomes measurable?	Baseline, target, verified data, decision rule.	Activity or expenditure presented as impact.
Can findings change delivery?	Review forum, corrective action, tracked closure.	Evaluation published without management response.
Will capability endure?	Local decision rights, recurrent resources, skills, records, ex-post test.	Continuation depends on external staff or temporary funding.
Can the public examine performance?	Accessible objectives, methods, results, limits, and corrections.	Selective success claims without source or denominator.

Country-led implementation

MCC’s operating model adds a complementary institutional principle: partner governments identify priorities through consultation and establish accountable local entities to implement programs. MCC also publishes economic analyses, budgets, expected results, progress information, and external evaluations. These practices illustrate how ownership and transparency can be designed into administration.

MCC’s description is an official account of its model, not an external effectiveness finding. External evaluations should be consulted for claims about individual program impact.

Primary U.S. Government sources

GAO-15-377 · Safeguards for Government-to-Government Funding

March 26, 2015 · Risk, audit, capacity, ownership, and sustainability findings

[Official report and recommendation status →](#)

GAO-19-466 · Federal Monitoring and Evaluation Guidelines

July 31, 2019 · Assessment against 28 leading practices

[Official report →](#)

GAO-21-373 · State Foreign-Assistance Data Review

May 10, 2021 · Data, indicators, targets, and evaluation use

[Official report and implemented recommendation →](#)

Millennium Challenge Corporation · Country Ownership

Agency explanation · Local leadership and transparent implementation

[Official MCC resource →](#)

Reviewed August 21, 2026. Dates and scopes are shown so historical findings are not represented as current government-wide conditions.



Institutional capability is a strategic asset.

This paper provides an evidence-based foundation for institutional consultation and further ASPC research. It should not be used as legal or investment advice.

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