COMMON UNDERSTANDING ON THE NEXUS APPROACH
Briefing Paper

October 2021

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Background

Over the past decades, conflicts have become much more complex and protracted: Syria, South Sudan and Ukraine are only a few examples of ongoing humanitarian crises the world faces today. The number of countries experiencing a protracted crisis has increased from 13 in 2005 to 31 in 2019. In a conflict that lasts several years, there is a need to offer longer-term solutions, particularly as 16% of the world's population is now living in countries experiencing a protracted humanitarian crisis.

Driven in large part by the extent of protracted crises and conflict-generated humanitarian needs and displacement, a series of conceptual shifts, new policies and new funding approaches are appearing. This development marks a new momentum to link relief, rehabilitation, and development – broadly known as the "humanitarian-development nexus", or increasingly, "humanitarian-development-peace-nexus" which includes a peace-dimension. The implementation of the nexus approach provides immediate actions and long-term investments to strengthen the resilience of individuals, communities or countries to cope with, adapt to and recover quickly from shocks and stressors, and to address systematic root causes of poverty and conflicts. For the sake of sustainable peace and development, vulnerabilities and inequalities need to be addressed before, during and after the crises.

As an internal brief, the document targets organizations working in humanitarian aid, long-term development or both in humanitarian aid and development cooperation.[1]

A Definition of the Nexus-Approach

In the past decades, actors in development cooperation and humanitarian aid have worked towards integrated approaches and formulated different nexus-approaches.[2] In general, the nexus-approach describes the interconnection between sectors as well as the phases we work in (evolved out of LRRD-approach).[3]

In this paper, focus is given to the nexus that bridges the humanitarian-development divide, the "humanitarian-development nexus" (double nexus). It refers to the interlinkage between needs-based humanitarian actions with long-term human rights-based solutions, the combination of short-, medium-

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[1] This document was developed within the Austrian NGO platform **Global Responsibility (AG Globale Verantwortung)** by organizations working in the field of Humanitarian Aid. It aims at providing background to the nexus discussions and at presenting a common understanding of the nexus-approach.

[2] e.g. UN Water (n.d.): Water, Food and Energy. Available at: https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/water-food-and-energy, accessed on 20/10/2021

[3] European Commission (01/03/2021): Resilience and Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/resilience_en, accessed on 20/10/2021

and long-term interventions when dealing with a protracted or recurring humanitarian crisis as well as in contexts of risk for more frequent disasters and negative effects of climate change. Extended by the peace-dimension the "humanitarian-development-peace nexus" (triple nexus) opens up much more room for discussion as there are numerous perspectives to this dimension.

a. Humanitarian-Development Nexus

The *World Humanitarian Summit*, the *Grand Bargain*, the *2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development*, the *UN's New Way of Working* and the *UN and World Bank Humanitarian-Development-Peace Initiative* (HDPI), have all put in place policy and operational measures addressing a joint humanitarian and development approach.

In its May 2017 *Conclusions*,[4] the Council called on the Commission and Member States to further operationalize the Nexus-approach by implementing it in several pilot countries, with a focus on enhancing the use of best practices and the generation of evidence. Humanitarian and development actors are encouraged to have multi-year planning and programming cycles, joint risk and vulnerability analyses, joined-up planning, and coordinated programmatic approaches based on a better understanding of the context of the country of implementation. As follow-up to the WHS, the Commission selected six priority countries, with specific emphasis on situations of protracted displacement, to test the EU's approach to operationalizing the Nexus. Each of these countries – Chad, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, and Uganda – faces ongoing, acute and protracted crisis.

In November 2017, the *Council Conclusions on A Strategic Approach to Resilience in EU's External Action*[5] committed to developing a more ambitious political, structural, long-term and context-specific approach to addressing vulnerabilities and underlying risks, and to factors and dynamics of fragility while giving greater weight to anticipating disruptive pressures and shocks, including by recognising the specific vulnerabilities of certain groups within societies, to preparedness and prevention. With the adoption of the *EU's Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises* in 2018, the 'triple nexus' has become increasingly part of the EU's nexus deliberations and understanding.

According to a study in 2019,[6] *Joint Programming* (JP) is one of the key aid effectiveness commitments of EU development partners and promotes an integrated approach to EU external action. It has widely been

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[4] Council of the European Union (19/05/2017): Operationalising the Humanitarian-Development Nexus - Council conclusions. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf, accessed on 20/10/2021

[5] Council of the European Union (13/11/2017): A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action – Council conclusions. Available at: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14191-2017-INIT/en/pdf, accessed on 20/10/2021
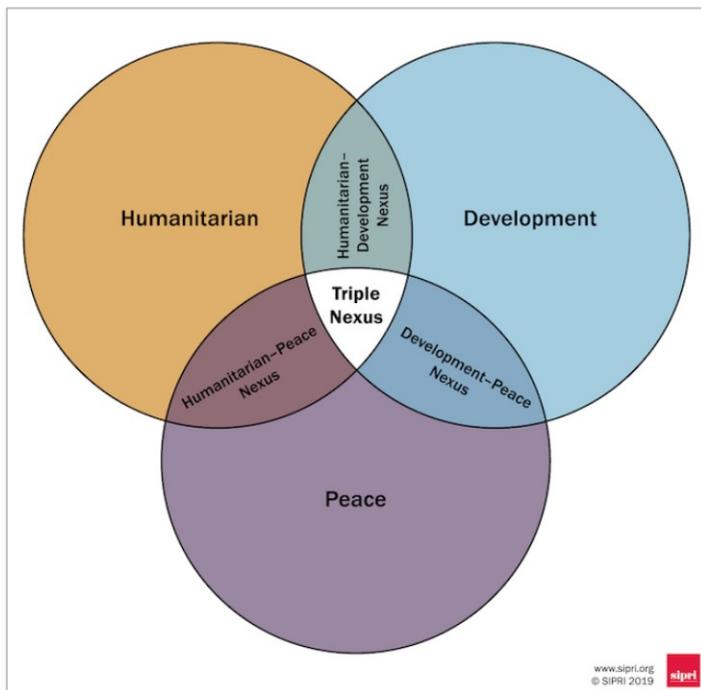
[6] European Commission (25/10/2019): Joint Programming in Fragile States. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/events/joint-programming-fragile-states-0_en, accessed on 20/10/2021

recognised as a tool for bringing together the political and cooperation spheres, as well as involving other key actors (humanitarian, security, peacebuilding & stabilisation) in common planning processes. Yet, in complex, fragile and conflict-affected settings, JP cannot be implemented as a standardized mechanism merely focused on delivering a product (the joint strategy). It should be promoted as a flexible process, centred around joint conflict and risk analysis as an important starting point for a fragility and resilience-focused strategy.

b. Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

The *Humanitarian-Development-Peace Initiative* (HDPI) is a joint effort by the United Nations and the World Bank Group to work together in new ways across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence.

Figure 1 Illustration of the Triple Nexus. Available at: https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2019/connecting-dots-triple-nexus, accessed on 20/10/2021

It is based upon an *United Nations General Assembly's Resolution* in 2016 on review of the *United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture* (27.4.2016): "Recognizing that an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, security and developmental actors, within and outside of the United Nations system, consistent with their respective mandates, and the Charter of the United Nations, is critical to sustaining peace, and essential for improving respect for human rights, advancing gender equality, empowering women and youth, strengthening the rule of law, eradicating poverty, building institutions and advancing economic development in conflict-affected countries."[7]

The peace dimension, however, remains an issue of discussion. Both the EU and the UN lack a clear definition of the peacebuilding component at this point (Oct 2020). EU's reflection around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is for now limited to internal coordination between EU bodies and is, despite the six pilot projects, far from ready to translate into operational terms.

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[7] United Nations (27/04/2016): Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2282 (2016) on Review of United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture. Available at: https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12340.doc.htm, accessed on 20/10/2021

The perspective from which the peace-dimension is considered, determines its interpretation. It could range from "negative peace" (i.e. the absence of violence) to "positive peace" (i.e. the absence of violence and of structural violence, with "attitudes, institutions and structures which create and sustain peaceful societies"),[8] and from "hard security", that is militarised approaches to conflict issues to "soft security", i.e. human security, conflict prevention, conflict transformation and mediation.

Many states consider *peace* mostly from the perspective of political processes, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, or the security dimension. Increasingly, their interpretation focuses on state security, counter-terrorism, and (militarised) stabilisation measures, which is the point at which humanitarian aid should be firewalled, as it is not a crisis management instrument, according to VOICE.[9] While concepts such as soft security and positive peace allow NGOs to contribute, perspectives of hard security exclude humanitarian organisations who cannot continue to work across the three nexus dimensions, as this interpretation of the peace component runs counter to humanitarian principles.

On European level, there are different entities who represent NGOs that work in humanitarian or development spheres. VOICE, representing NGOs in the humanitarian sector, underlines that *peace* generally involves working with communities around conflict resolution, reconciliation, building social cohesion, or peacebuilding at a community level.[10] CONCORD, as European confederation of relief and development NGOs, declares that under no circumstances should the EU's short-term (security or migration) domestic interests drive the development agenda. The aid/development effectiveness principles should be fully respected and applied to all forms of development cooperation.[11]

A Common Understanding of the Nexus-Approach

From a humanitarian NGO perspective and based on the humanitarian principles, the humanitarian imperative is the starting point of the common understanding defined below. The centre of our work is the people we serve, providing our services to them directly or through mutual partnership (with our implementing partners). Our work is driven by reducing suffering and poverty depending on humanitarian

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[8] Institute for Economics and Peace (05/2017): Positive Peace Report. Available at: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Positive-Peace-Report-2017.pdf, accessed on 20/10/2021

[9] VOICE (10/2019): NGO Perspectives on the EUs Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, p. 21. Available at: https://voiceeu.org/news/voice-report-ngos-perspectives-on-the-eu-s-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus, accessed on 20/10/2021

[10] VOICE (10/2019): NGO Perspectives on the EUs Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, p. 21. Available at: https://voiceeu.org/news/voice-report-ngos-perspectives-on-the-eu-s-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus, accessed on 20/10/2021

[11] CONCORD Europe (12/2017): Making the case for strong EU development cooperation budget in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. CONCORD Europe Position. Available at: https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CONCORD-Position-on-MFF-post2020.pdf, accessed on 20/10/2021

needs in a given context as well as by strengthening capacities towards increased resilience. The interlinkage of humanitarian response with development has guided our work within the last decades based on a people-centred approach. This adds not only a long-term perspective to the work but also the aspect of supporting partner countries' own development priorities and policy processes. The nexus approach characterizes the connectivity of humanitarian and development (as well as peace) measures aiming at contributing to the achievement of humanitarian and development goals. These measures are complementary and jointly planned. This is particularly important in view of protracted crisis. Challenges such as climate change (both slow and fast onset), fragility of states, recurring and complex conflicts as well as pandemics are creating complex realities, in which humanitarian and development contexts alternate and coexist.

The nexus-approach offers major **opportunities** to improve needs-based short and long-term solutions and to define objectives based on the partner countries' own development priorities. Local, national and international organisations working in both humanitarian and development contexts can contribute firsthand experiences in combining short- and long-term approaches, which can be scaled up and built upon. Local partner organisations and grass roots initiatives or communities are the first to provide support to people in need and have been linking relief and rehabilitation with development. They react to the realities on the ground – be it sudden crisis, for instance due to extreme weather events or conflict, protracted crisis or gradual deterioration of the environment. In longstanding inclusive and transparent partnerships following mutual accountability and benefiting from capacity building processes, these local stakeholders are constantly adapting their work to current needs and contexts. Some also address local drivers of conflict and foster social cohesion, mostly at community level. Thus, they represent living examples in implementing the nexus-approach. Strengthening local civil society and institutions contributes to building the resilience of people and local communities, and moving towards localisation.

Second, adopting a nexus-approach is about offering the necessary operational flexibility to address people's humanitarian and development needs (in protracted crises) in a coordinated manner. This represents opportunities for donors and organizations at two levels. On the one hand, it allows an update of **funding approaches** (such as the *Joint Programming initiative*) **and institutional structures.** Currently, these approaches and structures create institutional barriers and coordination needs that do not reflect the reality of people in need in protracted and complex crises. On the other hand, it encourages a stronger analysis of the **internal humanitarian-development divide** within the structures of NGOs as different departments of one organisation might be involved. In order to ensure the flexibility necessary for nexus programming, adaptive management and thorough monitoring and evaluation processes need to be established. Furthermore, the nexus approach enhances effective coordination and collaboration among the different stakeholders on the ground.

Despite the clear advantages of the nexus, there remain **challenges**: Often interventions merging human-
itarian and development governance and structures are perceived as being part of a government response
and humanitarian NGOs have observed with concern that states approach the nexus in a manner that
may instrumentalize aid for security or political objectives. When this happens, humanitarian organiza-
tions are not perceived as neutral and therefore unable to continue fulfilling their mandate and can lose
their access to the affected population. There are also implications for staff security in a post-conflict
setting when lines between actors are blurred. This was evident in the *hearts and minds campaign* by US
and NATO forces in Afghanistan who delivered and thus militarized humanitarian aid and effectively
turned humanitarian workers into targets as it became unclear who pursued which mandate.[12] Instru-
mentalization of humanitarian organizations' work towards any political agenda cannot be accepted un-
der any circumstances – humanitarian work must be anchored in the humanitarian principles.

A nexus approach looks different in each location and context. Programming needs to build on context
assessments (including vulnerability, inequalities and discrimination based on ethnicity, disability, sexual
orientation, gender, age, etc.), systematic conflict and gender analysis and localised approaches. How-
ever, in view of the initial phase of EU's pilot country exercise, for instance, a brief of the *European Think
Tanks Group* describes a "disconnect between the headquarters-driven, often abstract interpretation of
the nexus, and the reality on the ground".[13] Shifting to a nexus approach requires adequate, flexible,
longer-term funding that allows for adaptive, context-specific programming, and that enables NGOs to
build relevant partnerships and internal systems and structures necessary to address evolving local needs
and vulnerabilities in an impactful way.

From Theory to Practice
Turning theory into action would require that humanitarian and development interventions should not
be merged but should be seen as being complementary. Where possible, joint (not common) analyses,
for instance, could be add value. A nexus approach needs to enhance capacities and accountability of local
and national governments to prevent, prepare for and respond to crisis and to support recovery. Moreo-
ver, crisis affected people are not only perceived as "people in need" but as right holders. This allows
acting in a more sustainable way, for instance by creating a conducive environment for refugees by pro-
moting durable livelihoods or access to government services.

Regarding the triple nexus, that would require determining the peace-dimension. As mentioned above,
interpretations of the peace dimension differ significantly and no common definition has been agreed on.

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[12] Jamie A. Williamson (12/2011): Using humanitarian aid to 'win hearts and minds': a costly failure? In: International Review of
the Red Cross, Vol. 93, No. 884. Available at: https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-884-williamson.pdf,
accessed on 20/10/2021

[13] European Think Tanks Group (24/04/2020): EU humanitarian aid: Caught between nexus and independence. Available at:
https://ettg.eu/institute/ettg/eu-humanitarian-aid-caught-between-nexus-and-independence, accessed on 20/10/2021

Any process that aims at contributing to *peace* aspires to being transformative, a process that ideally transforms in a positive manner throughout a defined – but definitely longer – period of time and is always related to economic and political development, sometimes also involving hard security and military action, in particular when international community is involved. Depending on the definition of the peace dimension, the scope of the mandate of NGOs as well as the impact of their work may be limited.
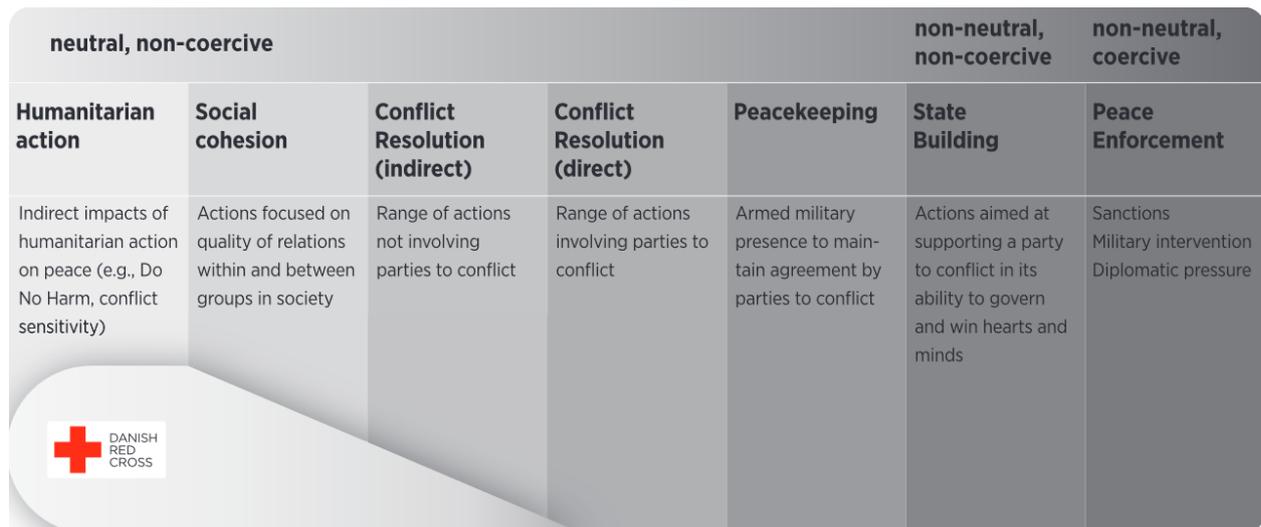
neutral, non-coercive					non-neutral, non-coercive	non-neutral, coercive
Humanitarian action	**Social cohesion**	**Conflict Resolution (indirect)**	**Conflict Resolution (direct)**	**Peacekeeping**	**State Building**	**Peace Enforcement**
Indirect impacts of humanitarian action on peace (e.g., Do No Harm, conflict sensitivity)	Actions focused on quality of relations within and between groups in society	Range of actions not involving parties to conflict	Range of actions involving parties to conflict	Armed military presence to maintain agreement by parties to conflict	Actions aimed at supporting a party to conflict in its ability to govern and win hearts and minds	Sanctions Military intervention Diplomatic pressure

Figure 2 Positioning Danish Red Cross on the "Peace-Building" Continuum. Available at: https://www.globaleverantwor-tung.at/download/?id=3011, accessed on 20/10/2021
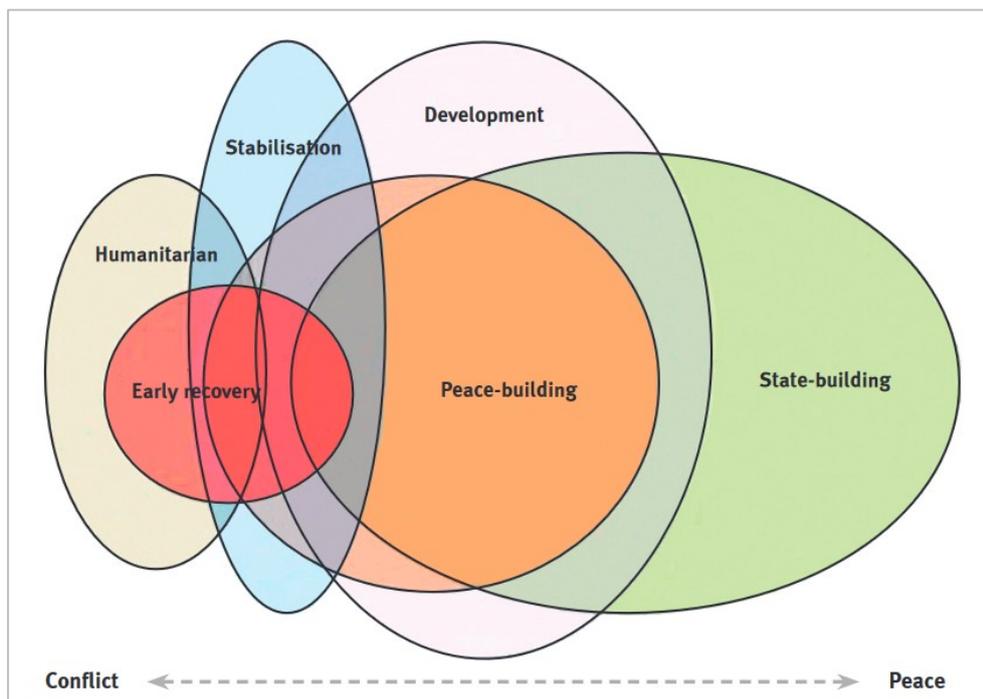
Like Danish Red Cross (position paper on the triple nexus), as shown in figure 2, all humanitarian organizations have the mandate to work across the first two peace aspects humanitarian action and social cohesion, with some organizations going further into indirect or direct conflict resolution.

Due to complex governance issues in most countries experiencing protracted humanitarian crises, pursuing the peace component may threaten the existence of humanitarian actors due to autocratic tendencies of the state. However, humanitarian and development organizations can very well consider local drivers of conflict and contribute to a culture of peace, social cohesion, and social transformation. For humanitarian organizations conflict-sensitive programming and reinforcing connectors between different groups in a society is a standard part of the *do no harm approach*. In practice, this might mean providing access to basic service to all parties of a conflict, equal representation of all stakeholders and/ or promoting humanitarian principles, International Humanitarian Law and a culture of non-violence across conflict divides. Sometimes, dialogue with international humanitarian organizations contributes to establishing a culture of dialogue between warring parties.

However, if the peace dimension refers to hard security, NGOs will find it much more difficult or impossible to participate in any operational approach. Being associated with any political or military motives or

interests would have immense negative consequences on the work of NGOs. The *Harvard Humanitarian Initiative Paper: Realities and Myths of the 'Triple Nexus': Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Action in Mali Humanitarian Action at the Frontlines: Field Analysis Series, 2019* both found that: "One major concern that policy actors in the humanitarian sector have articulated about the nexus in general is that it risks politicizing humanitarian action. In Mali, the various concerns expressed about the viability of the "triple nexus" policy concept have no doubt proven valid. In this context, there has been a definitive blurring of the lines between peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian activities".[14] The paper further states that many actors in Mali perceive the international community to be dedicated to the substitution of the state, operating without adequate reflection on how to work toward independent state functioning, and ultimately feeding into state corruption and exploitative structures that do not connect with the local population. Peacebuilding has been subsumed by the counterterrorism agenda, meaning that short-term security gains have been prioritized over more extensive, long-term, inclusive, bottom-up peacebuilding efforts. By cultivating linkages between humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development efforts, humanitarian work in Mali has become implicated in the shortcomings and failings of the nexus' other two prongs.

Figure 3 International Approaches to Conflict and Transitional Settings. Available at: https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/5309.pdf, accessed on 20/10/2021

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[14] Emmanuel Tronc, Rob Grace, and Anaïde Nahikian (06/2019): Realities and Myths of the "Triple Nexus". Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Action in Mali. In: Humanitarian Action at the Frontlines: Field Analysis Series. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. Available at: https://hhi.harvard.edu/files/humanitarianinitiative/files/haf_-_mali.pdf?m=1606247448, accessed on 20/10/2021

While a contribution towards positive peace is not seen as compromising humanitarian principles per se, there may still be a context-specific need for humanitarians not to engage with peace and the triple nexus, and to work across the double nexus only – if, for example, neutrality was compromised by cooperating with certain peace actors. At the same time, even a double-nexus approach offers chances to address the root causes of resource conflicts, e.g. water structure rehabilitation projects in dry areas like Somali Region of Ethiopia have the potential to contribute to a *soft peace* process in the locality. Rigorous and specific contextual assessments are fundamental to decide on the appropriate approach.

Key Messages and Recommendations

- The Humanitarian imperative is central for humanitarian organizations working across the double and triple nexus; therefore, a needs-based approach to humanitarian assistance, which fully respects the humanitarian principles, *International Human Rights Law* (IHRL), and *International Humanitarian Law* (IHL), has to be ensured. A nexus policy framework must allow and support a context-specific and dignified response. To preserve neutrality, joint action of humanitarian, development, political and military actors and stakeholders in fragile situations/contexts is only possible if none of the actors is seen as partial or affiliated with one party to the conflict.

- Donors and policy makers need to develop a common and realistic understanding and definition of the peace-dimension that should be accorded with actors at all levels of societies and the states. It should involve working with communities around conflict resolution, reconciliation, building social cohesion, or peacebuilding at a community level, aspects towards which NGOs are able to contribute.

- Austrian donors (Austrian Development Agency/Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs) need to allocate sufficient, flexible, accountable and transparent multi-annual funding, in particular for protracted crises and conflicts by allocating an indicative minimum of 50% of Foreign Disaster Relief Fund (AKF) to protracted, forgotten and slow-onset disasters and conflicts. At the same time, the application of humanitarian principles and the humanitarian imperative for both *Foreign Disaster Relief Fund* (AKF) and humanitarian budget lines of Austrian Development Agency has to be safeguarded. This means that even though flexibility and a harmonization of funding instruments/cycles facilitates working across the nexus dimension, humanitarian aid and development cooperation budgets and funding instruments remain separate and independent from each other. Their respective goals – saving lives according to the humanitarian imperative and poverty reduction – must not be mixed.

- Ensure a high-degree of ownership, active and equal participation and engagement from local stakeholders, including vulnerable and marginalised groups, throughout the nexus-development and implementation process. Organizations and donors should integrate analysis and lessons-learned, as this contributes to y strengthening local civil society actors and institutions, and investing in building the resilience of people and local communities, organisations and donors contribute to moving towards localisation.

- Ensure that nexus programs are context-specific by building them on systematic conflict and gender analyses and, where possible, environmental sustainability analyses. Analyses done by NGOs should be funded by donors and occur early during implementation or an inception phase so as not to have a negative impact on the time-sensitive humanitarian components of a nexus programme.

Annex: Nexus in Practice – Project Examples

Double Nexus Humanitarian-Development

Syria – Red Cross
Small-scale business support in areas where fighting has ceased (*development in conflict setting*), repair of urban water supply systems (*development in conflict setting*).

Syria – Caritas
The program targets vulnerable households, to have improved ability to protect and sustain their lives while simultaneously protecting and strengthening their livelihoods towards increased self-reliance of men and women. The components of the project range from immediate assistance to respond to the dire socio-economic conditions and addressing the most immediate needs to restart business and business support, that is given over 2 years' time.

West Africa – Caritas together with HOPE'87, HORIZONT3000, ICEP, Jugend eine Welt, Light for the World International, Austrian Red Cross
The consortia program, in which different Austrian NGOs and their partner organisations are involved, aims in strengthening the resilience of vulnerable groups in Senegal and Burkina Faso by tackling short term and long-term needs in regards to the Covid-19 response. The components include on the one hand short-term assistance to avoid further spread of Covid-19 (e.g. medical support or risk communication) and on the other hand longer-term assistance by vocational education, creating income, diversification of agriculture. Disaster risk reduction is an integral part of the project.

Triple Nexus Humanitarian-Development-Peace

Darfur, Sudan – Red Cross

Tools & seeds for farmers in areas without fighting, enabling men to go back to their villages for planting season while families stayed in refugee camps (*development in conflict setting*); support to nomads outside refugee camps – e.g. water, animal vaccination campaigns; mobile clinics for semi-nomadic population developed with participatory methods (*access to resources always a conflict driver between farmers and nomads, therefore support nomadic populations to avoid spin-off conflicts as nomads did not go into IDP camps but tried to defend their lifestyle moving between frontlines*).

South Sudan – Red Cross

Volunteers whose ethnic groups are at war work jointly observing humanitarian values and principles *(peace by providing a societal connector across ethnic=conflict lines)*, International Humanitarian Law training for combatants *(universal set of rules for all warring parties; humanitarian dialogue & norms as a possible entry point to later peace process).*

Syria – Red Cross

Access to basic services for all conflict parties – e.g. choosing location of health unit where easily accessible for all *(neutrality and reinforcing a connector between warring parties – peace).*

Jordan – CARE Austria

Refugees and comprehensive case management, emergency cash assistance, and awareness raising around key protection concerns (*humanitarian*); opportunities for refugees and vulnerable Jordanians to strengthen their livelihood base with a focus on promoting economic empowerment of women and female youth (*development*). Community committees to identify and address key community concerns related to protection and social cohesion or to raise them with duty-bearers (*peace*). Across all project components, promote the leadership and active participation of women, girls, and female youth.

Niger/Chad – CARE Austria

Promote the access of highly vulnerable households to a social protection system, improved access of vulnerable households to basic social services, (*humanitarian*) Protecting and promoting the livelihoods of vulnerable households, (*development*) strengthening of social cohesion, conflict prevention and management, influencing capacity and relations between the inhabitants of the project municipalities and the decentralised structures and local authorities (*peace*).