Triple Nexus in Fragile Contexts: Next Steps

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Triple Nexus in Fragile Contexts: Next Steps

The triple nexus approach – understood as a more coherent engagement by humanitarian, peace, and development actors – is necessary to deal with the complexity of third-party engagements in fragile contexts. Implementing the triple nexus approach is challenging yet pivotal for more effective third-party impact.

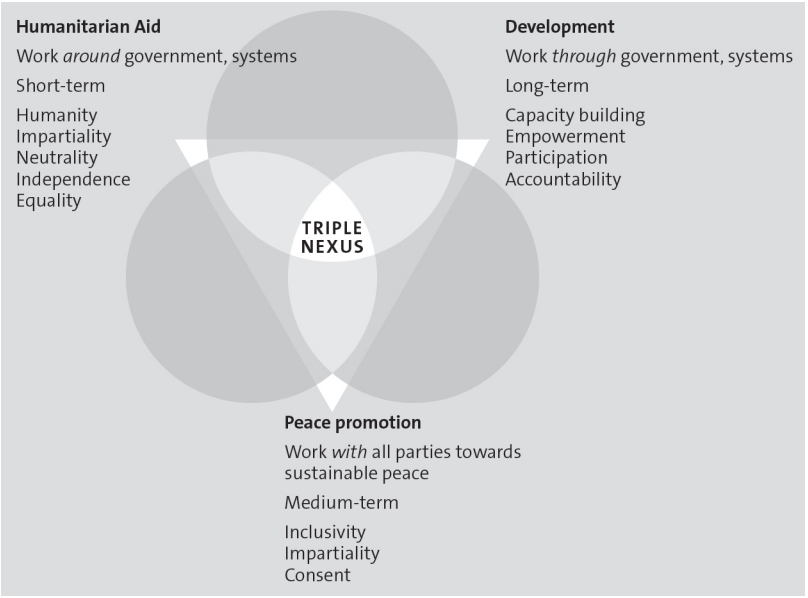
By Fritz Brugger, Joane Holliger, Simon J. A. Mason

Around 1.5 billion people live in fragile contexts, often suffering from conflict, insecurity, weak governance, displacement, and lack of health care and socioeconomic opportunities. In addition, climate change is hitting fragile contexts disproportionately. When Somalia disintegrated, Yugoslavia broke up, and the Rwanda genocide occurred, the interlinkages between armed conflict and fragile contexts became apparent. The global interdependencies became even clearer with 9/11. In the wake of the resurgence of terrorism, states that were seen as fragmented and fragile were now perceived as a security risk, not only by the US and the EU, but also by the UN; in the words of Kofi Annan: "Security threats are increasingly coming from governments that are being allowed to violate the rights of their individual citizens." These countries had thus "become a menace not only to their own people, but also to their own neighbors, and indeed the world."[1] This discourse had several implications:

First, the normalization of "fragile states": The World Bank, the OECD, and think tanks soon published rankings of fragile states. Fragility definitions initially focused on the formal state only, a

Key Points

- *Triple nexus:* Fragile contexts call for multi-dimensional engagements, where humanitarian, peace, and development actors work towards collective outcomes in an agile and synergistic way.
- *Challenges:* Institutions face challenges as to how to operationalize the triple nexus, including lack of mutual understanding, entrenched bureaucratic structures, rigid and competing funding flows, lack of partnership with local actors, and rigid compliance systems.
- *Respecting roles:* Greater comprehension of the different goals, roles, principles, and timeframes of humanitarian, peace, and development actors is the basis for improving coordination, overcoming bureaucratic silos, and restructuring funding flows.
- *Localization:* For the triple nexus to be effective, international actors need to partner with local actors, rather than using them as sub-contractors and outsourcing security and fiduciary risks. Local actors are forced to categorize themselves into humanitarian, peace, and development silos to access funds, going against their natural tendencies of a more holistic and localized approach.
- *Agile programming:* Classical results-based programming is limited due to lack of context predictability. Agile programming entails more flexible programming, monitoring, and evaluation approaches. As indicators of performance, a donor's annual disbursement rate needs to be replaced by indicators measuring impact.



combination of weak institutions, conflicts, lack of respect for human rights, and insufficient basic services for the population. Taken together, these criteria justified the need for external intervention. European countries, notably France, Germany, Norway, and also Switzerland, highlighted the importance of state formation and related approaches such as peacebuilding, mediation, human rights, and the social contract, which allowed for a more holistic understanding of fragile contexts. Not least because of their perception that they were mainly talked about and not with, seven governments of states labelled as fragile by the outside world formed a coalition in 2010 with the aim of bringing their priorities to the international dialogue on fragility.[2] Ten years after richer countries had declared fragile states a security risk, donor countries and fragile states met in Busan in 2011 to agree to "Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals" as guidelines for engagement with fragile states.

Second, the flow of money: During the 1990s, most development resources were dedicated to states with good governance and efficient institutions that implemented economic and political reforms – trade liberalization, privatization, and formal democratization. With most aid flowing to the "good performers," fragile states were seen as *aid orphans*. The stronger influence of the security concerns led to a quadrupling of aid funds to fragile countries between 2000 and 2018.

Finally, the triple nexus: When moving to fragile states, development actors bumped into humanitarians and peacebuilders who were already active in such contexts. At the same time, humanitarian actors were faced with the increasingly chronic nature of a context's instability and decided to stay longer and with an increased spectrum of services. Overlapping areas of engagement and problematic funding incentives – e.g. annual institutional disbursement rate as measurement of "success" or the need for short-term visibility – hampered complementarity and synergies. Protracted crises required a shift from a linear transition mindset (first humanitarian assistance, then development and then peace) to one of simultaneous and complementary work.

The Triple Nexus

The triple nexus as a concept and operational framework quickly gained traction in the "Humanitarian, Development, and Peace" (HDP) jargon (that more logically should be referred to as HPD, as peace is an enabler for development). The triple nexus refers to the "interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions" and the nexus approach aims at "strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity" between these actors.[3] The idea is to agree on collective outcomes, i.e., concrete and measurable results that HPD and other relevant actors want to achieve jointly over a period of 3–5 years to address people's needs, reduce their vulnerabilities, and increase their resilience. Understanding challenges to its implementation starts by understanding the different mandates of the three domains.

Humanitarian assistance is characterized by the key principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence with the aim to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity during crisis (human-made and natural). A crisis, as per its definition, has the underlying connotation of being temporary and delimited in time, and ideally, so should humanitarian aid. Humanitarian assistance is therefore often characterized by short-term emergency funding and planning, even if renewed year after year.

Development cooperation activities and funding, on the other hand, span many years, and their areas of intervention correlate (mainly) to the 17 sustainable development goals with the overarching aim to end extreme poverty and inequality, as well as to adapt to climate change. Development cooperation assistance is usually channeled through explicit support to national and international development plans, with direct funding to government institutions and partners in selected countries, while relying on shared values, objectives, trust, and transparency.[4]

Peace promotion is more political as it aims to assist actors in conflict address contested issues and "remove causes of war."[5] It requires impartiality and inclusivity, supporting local and national actors in developing processes and mechanisms to deal with societal conflict in non-vio-

lent ways. Examples are mediation to assist negotiations or the support of governance formation (e.g., local peace committees). The consent of many stakeholders needs to be gained, including state but also non-state actors, opposition groups (armed and non-armed), women's groups, youth and business actors, and customary and religious actors. Peace promotion is a process rather than a set of activities, and thus a long-term and multi-layered endeavor. In fragile contexts, it is often the domain which receives the least funding and despite growing acknowledgement of longer-term visions and engagements needed, funding is disbursed with short to medium-term (at best) objectives – rationalizing this by the fragile contexts in which they operate.

Challenges

Clear roles as a prerequisite for collaboration: Humanitarian actors sometimes fear that their principles of neutrality and impartiality will be threatened and instrumentalized by working with peace actors who are more political and development actors who aim to strengthen state institutions. Respecting the others' roles and working principles is a key prerequisite for constructive collaboration. The starting point is a common understanding of the situation through joint analysis across systems and actors, which serves as the basis for the identification of collective outcomes. This also helps to work out the interventions by the different nexus partners towards those outcomes. Currently, the depth of analysis is often insufficient due to time limitations, lack of dedicated funding, and a tendency to focus on problems that justify planned interventions.

Entrenched bureaucratic silos: International organizations like the UN have both the mandate (through its different agencies) and the internal know-how to work across HPD. However, bureaucratic silos, internal competition, and struggles for funding all affect the operationalization of the triple nexus. The same applies to donor countries that have pooled their resources into one pot: Human resources structures remain largely siloed and the competition for funds persists, even if within a single pot. Bureaucratic silos are entrenched in most NGOs, foreign ministries, and international organizations. Organic cooperation across silos to innovatively move towards effective operationalization of the triple nexus is rare. Instead, organizations are often faced with even heavier institutional structures as nexus-functions or nexus-departments are being created in addition to existing structures. What is needed are more coherent and flexible funding instruments, with greater integration of the target population in program design, instead of institutional survival, and political positioning.

Securitization: Another dark shadow hangs over the triple nexus, encapsulated in the "Petraeus doctrine." It argued that HPD actors should all serve the higher purpose of counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency objectives, whether they like it or not. Even if this "comprehensive approach" has largely been discredited for almost a decade, not least of all from the military side which became worried about overstretching its mandate, its implications are still felt today. One recent survey among development and humanitarian workers indicated that two-thirds of the respondents felt it was "likely" or "very likely" that the triple nexus mixes peacebuilding approaches with approaches from security, counterterrorism, and stabilization.[6] Triple nexus advocates therefore emphasize that collective outcomes need to be developed with the population affected. Inclusivity, seeking ways to constructively engage with all actors – including armed non-state actors – is key to societal peace and avoiding the trap of one-sided support.

Lacking localization: Localization – decentralizing power and enabling local actors to influence actions and decisions – is necessary to effectively operationalize the nexus. Today, local organizations are often used for subcontracting implementation, as well as outsourcing security and fiduciary risks, rather than using their context knowledge and adaptation capacity. Challenges to localization include risk averseness of donors exacerbated by rigid compliance tools, power imbalances, local entities perceived as competitors by international partners, international prejudice towards local actors.

Next steps

How to walk the talk of triple nexus? Respecting different approaches is the basis for collaboration.

Some of the successful stories around the triple nexus have been based on good personal relations and informal encounters between different key actors on the ground. An after-work drink together has solved many problems and given rise to pragmatic solutions escaping HPD silos. These informal fora of cooperation should not be underestimated, as the needed structural changes for its operationalization lag behind. Nevertheless, they often don't lead to long-lasting systemic collaboration efforts. Institutionally, these circumstantial "solutions" are complicated to justify in an accountability environment increasingly preferring compliance over relevance. The triple nexus, operational framework was initially a top-down push. Reflecting on restructuring funding streams and creating additional layers of bureaucracy with triple nexus coordi-

Further Reading

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi / Simon J. A. Mason, ***Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace*** (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2019). This book explores how to link mediation to governance-building efforts in fragile contexts.

nation mechanisms are not enough and may even be detrimental. Organizations which have the triple nexus mandate within their structures should take the responsibility and the risks to allocate substantive funds to pilot initiatives to test various triple nexus approaches.

Steps also need to be taken to move towards a more thorough approach to the localization agenda. Increased local and international exchanges in terms of context analysis and operations would be beneficial to avoid duplication on the one hand and identify gaps and needs on the other.

Some good examples are arising, as in the case of the Area Reference Group (ARG) which was created in 2021 in the conflict-plagued and climate affected State of Jonglei in South Sudan. Born out of the South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF), it was initially meant as a tool for the World Food Program (WFP) to coordinate the work of 22 of their implementing partners on four thematic areas. There was a realization that despite years of pumping in food, food security kept worsening year after year. Dealing with political level dynamics is not WFP's work, but it has found ways to work on entrenched inequity and isolation without overstepping its mandate or jeopardizing humanitarian principles. The ARG platform has since evolved (in size) and has made attempts to integrate resolutions of a local peace agreement by coordinating and agreeing on how different partners can support the implementation of some of the resolutions taken by the communities, based on their own area of expertise.

A further step is to understand that classical results-based programming is limited due to lack of context predictability. The core idea of agile programming is to be clear on the objective but then flexible as to the ways to reach this objective. Research and monitoring and evaluation of triple nexus approaches also lag behind. Positivist statistical and experimental academic research often lead to robust results by narrowing down dimensions, thereby failing to adequately deal with the interactions and complexities of dynamically evolving fragile contexts. New approaches include the use of local accountability mechanisms and peer review processes. This allows positive, unintended results to be monitored and used to steer and reward engagements.

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