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The peace dilemma in the triple nexus: challenges and opportunities for the humanitarian–development–peace approach

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ABSTRACT

The triple humanitarian, development, and peace nexus is rising in prominence to promote better coordination between actors and actions. In this article, we examine three key challenges regarding the addition of peace to the double humanitarian–development nexus: how (1) the peace component affects the humanitarian principles; (2) projects adapt to differing timescales of activities; and (3) donor financing strategies and funding modalities affect the nexus implementation. Methodologically, we analyse projects in Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia, conduct a literature review and 55 interviews. Our findings show that incorporating peace into the humanitarian–development nexus requires systemic and cultural shifts in how international aid is delivered and accounted for, including, in some cases, a move away from project-based approaches. The main implications of this research are that adding peace to the nexus approach requires increased coordination and a critical rethink of humanitarian and development systems across political and operational actors.

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SDG 3: Good health and well-being; SDG 10: Reduced inequalities; SDG 16: Peace, Justice and strong institutions; SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, multiple agendas have promoted better integration and coordination between humanitarian and development assistance *and* between development and peace, in terms of policies, strategies, and practice (Mena and Hilhorst 2021; Mosel and Levine 2014; OECD-DAC 2021). For example, linking relief, rehabilitation and development discussions date back to at least the 1980s (Otto and Weingärtner 2013), with the aim to move from temporary “emergency” solutions to more sustainable, development-focused outcomes (Rama 2017, 1).

Often referred to as the humanitarian–development or “double” nexus, a main limitation of this approach was that it missed the crucial component in achieving sustainable development – the need for peace, so that humanitarian and development efforts are not lost due to (violent) social conflict (OECD-DAC 2021). While sustainable development has many elements to it, including economic and environmental dimensions, for this research, sustainability is being narrowly defined as related to peace. During the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, explicit attention was focused on systematically linking and better integrating humanitarian, development, and peace efforts. This integrated approach led to what is now referred to as the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus, or

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simply the “triple nexus”. While most organisations acknowledge the importance of peace, there have been difficulties in figuring out if, when, and how peace and peacebuilding should be integrated into humanitarian and development actions. In particular, three main questions arise when operationalising the triple nexus: (1) whether introducing the peace component to the humanitarian–development nexus undermines the humanitarian principles; (2) how triple nexus programs adapt to differing timescales inherent in emergency, development and peace goals; and (3) how donor financing strategies and funding modalities can be harmonised to support long-term peace (Brown and Mena 2021). Each of these questions are underpinned by political, ideological, and practical dilemmas that are specific to conflict-affected contexts.

This article seeks to shed light on these questions by methodologically conducting a comprehensive literature review of triple nexus debates and an examination of triple nexus projects that have addressed these questions in practice. It includes 55 interviews with donors, practitioners, and academics on their experiences considering and operationalising this integrative approach, particularly in regard to the peace component.

In the following sections, we start by reviewing the primary methodological framing of the triple nexus, followed by the research questions and research methodology. Then, we analyse the main findings hindering the operationalisation of triple nexus approaches. Together with the analyses and research findings, in the final section we offer suggestions for moving this approach from policy discussions to its operationalisation. For practitioners, we offer a way forward for retaining humanitarian principles while working with a triple nexus approach. We also suggest ways in which short- and long-term activities in the same project can be harnessed to support the multiple, inter-connected needs of communities. For donors, we discuss options for financial strategies and funding modalities to comprehensively integrate peace across interventions and goals while recognising some of the political challenges to doing so.

The triple nexus continues to gain momentum in practice given the increasing recognition and acceptance that development, peace and stability happen in non-linear and context-specific ways, and that communities do not have single, isolated needs. As Mac Ginty (2011, 211) notes, communities and societies are dynamic, and actors and practices multifarious. Furthermore, the protracted nature of most conflicts and the time needed to find lasting solutions that have buy-in results in humanitarian, development, and peace actors working side by side to save lives, support peace and reconciliation, and facilitate sustainable development. The Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Colombia, Pakistan, Syria, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia are a few examples of such situations.

2. Understanding the triple nexus and the addition of peace

Early efforts to improve coordination between humanitarian aid and development-related actions started more than three decades ago with operationalising Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD)¹ and Mary Anderson’s books *Rising from the Ashes* (1998, with Peter J. Woodrow) and *Do No Harm* (1999) unambiguously connect international aid interventions to peace, conflict, and political outcomes. Also known as the “relief–development continuum” (Harmer and Macrae 2004), LRRD emerged as a strategy to provide humanitarian assistance in a way that connected medium- and long-term development initiatives, particularly by linking emergency, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development activities in a coordinated and complementary way (Otto and Weingärtner 2013; Stevens et al. 2018). While the concept and practice of Do No Harm is stated as an important part of most intervention strategies and actions, international aid continues to be enmeshed in political dynamics which play into the ability to fully deliver the appropriate solutions to meet the needs of those most affected by conflict (Herbert 2019), for example, in Myanmar (Décobert 2020), Syria (United Nations Security Council 2021), and South Sudan (Mena and Hilhorst 2022; Sullivan 2018).

On the one hand, the LRRD approach faced criticism for being linear (Gómez and Kawaguchi 2016; Harmer and Macrae 2004; Hinds 2015); not properly acknowledging the protractedness of

many crises, the (in)ability of humanitarian actors to provide medium-term solutions (Hilhorst 2007; Mosel and Levine 2014); and for having a top-down perspective of humanitarian aid (Hilhorst 2018; Otto and Weingärtner 2013). At least in part, due to these issues, this approach lacked wide-scale buy-in. However, most actors did see and acknowledge the importance of linking or better coordinating humanitarian and development activities (Mena and Hilhorst 2021). On the other hand, Do No Harm has been widely accepted and adopted as an important component of all types of aid interventions: “[Do No Harm] has gradually come to be regarded as a principle and no longer as an approach to conflict-affected situations ... Since 2014, [Do No Harm] has emerged as a broad principle and is used in many different ways” (Charancle and Lucchi 2018, 5). Given this background, Do No Harm, peacebuilding, and LRRD are at the core of the triple nexus.

2.1. The triple nexus

Considering previous attempts to improve coordination and the challenges posed by working in increasingly complex and conflict-affected contexts, the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 promoted a “new way of working” (OCHA 2017). This called for humanitarian and development actors to work together and advocated for the inclusion of peace objectives to improve aid effectiveness and coherence in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (OCHA 2017; 2018). This became known as the triple or humanitarian–development–peace (triple or HDP) nexus.

To advance this new agenda, two years after the World Humanitarian Summit, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General released the “Sustaining Peace” report, which highlights the importance of working together towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the need for “greater coherence and synergies across the United Nations system” (Guterres 2018, 2; Howe 2019, 1). This report also focused on the need to address conflict to alleviate human suffering, reduce the scale of emergencies, and achieve sustainable development. By focusing explicitly on these challenges, the “Sustaining Peace” report effectively brought the peace component into the nexus. This led to a recommendation report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) to advance the triple nexus² (OECD-DAC 2021) and, with it, organisations and donors began to consider how to operationalise the nexus.

The OECD-DAC’s triple nexus recommendations were adopted by 29 of its member states as well as the European Union and five UN agencies³ in February 2019. This is seen by many as an important step to progressing the triple nexus and, at the same time, leaves the peace component of the nexus open to wide interpretations with potentially competing approaches, theories and practices (Dalrymple and Swithern 2019; Redvers and Parker 2020).

2.2. What’s in a name? Peace, peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding

While it is not the focus of this paper to unpack different conceptualisations of peace in and of themselves, it is nonetheless important to reflect on the three distinct areas of peace-oriented international relations – these being peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Each of these affects the policy debates on and implementing practices of using a triple nexus approach. Furthermore, how an organisation operationalises the triple nexus very much depends on how they understand peace and their connection to it. The OECD-DAC report from the “Partnership for Peace” roundtable discussion in October 2020 resulted in the recommendation that prevention (of violent conflict), mediation, and peacebuilding should be prioritised with the increased “support for prevention mediation and peacebuilding and early recovery, with the view to decreasing risk of violent conflict, disasters and crises ...” (OECD-DAC 2021, 8). The recommendations further state the importance of addressing root causes of violence, voice, social cohesion, trust, and rights (Ibid).

The operationalisation of peace in the triple nexus is often based on political motivations and interests, an organisation’s ability to respond to differing conflict and political scenarios, as well as

the degrees of social and state fragility in a context (Demmers 2012). In this regard, politics is intertwined with why and how the different components of the triple nexus are implemented and linked. Additionally, humanitarian, development, peace, and politics are interdependent of one another – influencing actions and outcomes (Hilhorst 2013).

For instance, *Peace-making* is the process of coming to an agreement among political or military elites for the purpose of establishing peace between parties in conflict. Peace-making is generally seen as a part of formal diplomatic efforts and at the level of informal diplomacy, including non-state actors, and, ideally, civil society groups, in order to create as inclusive a process as possible (Mapendere 2000). *Peacekeeping*, on the other hand, is seen by many as “holding the peace” through security forces which might be deployed by the UN, a regional security grouping, bilateral security assistance, or another type of military force. This “hard” side of peace includes the UN peacekeeping missions as well as military actions (i.e. – ensure there is no fighting). Galtung terms this as negative peace because the focus is on the absence of violence, while positive peace is about “building better relations”, which includes justice, equity, and cooperation (Galtung 1985). Some argue that negative peace is preferable to war and violence and that negative peace may lead to positive peace (Galtung 1985).

Peacebuilding is perhaps the most elusive term to define as it is interpreted in various different ways. In the 1990s and 2000s, the “liberal peace” idea dominated peacebuilding, which involved building market-oriented democracies governed by the concepts of democratic rule of law and the protection of human rights. However, the liberal peace thesis has subsequently been criticised for being too linear or deterministic and focused on formal democratic institutions. The predominant assumption is still that ceasefires lead to peace processes, which lead to elections, and so on (Bramble and Paffenholz 2020, 16; in Paffenholz 2021). Multi-lateral organisations within the UN system now recognise that peacebuilding and “sustaining peace” (as it was branded in 2015) is in fact context-specific, multi-dimensional, cyclical, and very long term (Barnett et al. 2007). Depending on the context, *peacebuilding* could involve a broad array of activities including governance support, de-militarisation and reintegration of combatants, transitional justice and reconciliation, community trust-building, trauma counselling, peace education, or support for democratisation and transparency (see, for example: UN’s Note to the Secretary-General through the Deputy Secretary-General (United Nations 2006) and “One humanity: shared responsibility” (Ki-moon 2016)).

In its different forms, peace is the most malleable component of the triple nexus with different views on what exactly it means, how it works, and how it fits. These differences in how the UN, the European Commission, and individual governments and organisations label and understand “peacebuilding” reflect their different organisational mandates, histories, bureaucratic interests, assumptions, and political sensitivities (Barnett et al. 2007). As Duckworth notes, donor programming decisions on peace and other types of interventions are always driven to some extent by political agendas and can often conflict with the needs of the local population (Duckworth 2016, 7). Furthermore, given that different donors have their specific political agendas, this increases the complexity of coordinating aid nationally and globally. Adding to this are the differing views on and priorities for peace among actors such as UN agencies, non-governmental and civil society organisations (Barnett et al. 2007), and national governments. The politics of assistance financing adds an extra layer of complexity to the triple nexus.

Having multiple concepts of peace, which include the absence of conflict, the resolution of conflict, and sustainable management of conflict, creates a multitude of ways in which the peace component in the triple nexus can be viewed, discussed, and addressed. This means that peace has different interpretations that imply differing objectives and strategies, and different (real or perceived) political investments and incentives for interested parties. The differing approaches and underlying assumptions to peacebuilding which are adopted by different players are not just a conceptual problem, they translate into considerable differences in programming as well. Barnett et al. (2007, 53) suggest that international coordination and collaboration of “peacebuilding” is more than a technical feat, it is also profoundly political driven by individual, organisational, and national interests.

Operationalising peacebuilding in the triple nexus is, by and large, framed as “positive peace” for multi-mandated organisations. This means that activities primarily focus on moving beyond an absence of conflict to more transformative systems and societal change where social cohesion, trust-building, rights, and justice are of crucial importance. Although, as highlighted by the OECD-DAC among others, using a triple nexus approach and determining the appropriate actions should always be underpinned by context and gender analysis (OECD-DAC 2021, 8). Therefore, what specifically is appropriate, achievable, and scalable depends on the context, including a national government’s ability and interest in supporting positive and long-term change.

3. Research questions and methods

This research examines three specific questions of the triple nexus which have arisen in discourse and practice: (1) whether introducing the peace component to the humanitarian–development nexus undermines the humanitarian principles, mostly due to its political nature; (2) how the triple nexus adapts to different timescales inherent in emergency, development, and peace projects; (3) how different donor financing strategies and funding modalities could integrate peace. This article aims to shed light on these issues by building on previous case study research, the collection of new data, and a deepening of the analysis.

To answer these questions, this article further analyses the case of Islamic Relief and four of its country programs using triple nexus approaches. Islamic Relief was chosen as the main organisation for this study because of its profile as a multi-mandated organisation with projects using a triple nexus approach across geographic contexts funded by the same donor. This allows us to study and compare differences and similarities between the cases while some elements are constant such as the organisational structure and the donor’s requirements and support. To enrich the analysis and assess the findings of these four case studies, the article also included interviews from other international multi-mandated organisations which have been exploring using or are using triple nexus approaches. In this way, findings from Islamic Relief a multi-mandated faith-based international organisation with its specific strengths and challenges are coupled with other multi-mandated organisations to offer experiences of how the triple nexus can be planned for, discussed, and implemented across contexts.

In more detail, all four projects were implemented by the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) Islamic Relief in Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency over a three-year period (Brown and Mena 2021). The overarching goal of the projects was to support the peaceful transition of conflict-affected communities and enhance local resilience to conflict. A triple nexus approach was thought to be best suited to deliver this goal because it combined interventions and was adaptable to meet both short- and longer-term needs of the selected communities across the contexts.

Data collection included a literature review of academic materials; policy and UN documents; models, strategies, and project documents from organisations that are using triple nexus approaches; and specific internal documents, strategies, and reports from Islamic Relief. A total of 55 people were interviewed, consisting of 24 women and 31 men. As Table 1 shows, this included

Table 1. Detail of interviewees.

Organisation or type of interviewee	Number of people
Islamic Relief headquarters	18
Islamic Relief country and regional teams	9
International multi-mandated NGOs (INGOs) excluding Islamic Relief	8
Multi-lateral organisation (OECD/UN)	7
Bilateral donor	9
Academics/think tanks	4
<i>Total</i>	55

27 Islamic Relief staff members, eight representatives from other multi-mandated organisations which implement all three components of the triple nexus, nine representatives from bilateral donors, seven representatives from multi-lateral organisations including OECD and the UN, and four representatives from academic and think-tank organisations.

Two ethical approval processes were followed for this research. First, this research was collected under the framework of a consultancy with Islamic Relief which has a Safeguarding Policy. This policy details the steps that staff and consultants must take to ensure the safety and dignity of people with whom the organisation interacts. This policy states that informed consent must be obtained when gathering any kind of material for external communications, any risks of harm must be considered and addressed proactively. Furthermore, Islamic Relief has a Data Protection Policy and a Do No Harm commitment which were both followed during the research process. Additionally, the Research Steering Committee discussed particular sensitivities with the researchers at key points throughout the research process and reviewed the report text to ensure that these sensitivities were handled appropriately. Each participant gave their consent to be interviewed and for the information given to be used in confidentiality. Second, as part of the European Research Council Horizon 2020 project Humanitarian Governance number (number 884139), it has Ethical Approval by the Research Ethics Committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Through content analysis, four key themes emerged from the triple nexus literature: first, there was significant discussion about the need to move from conceptualisation of the triple nexus into practice with varying suggestions for how this may best be achieved. Second, there were debates about how best to merge financing and extend project timescales to support triple nexus programming. Third, defining the peace component in the nexus came out as an issue of particular concern, especially for humanitarian actors who are wary of political instrumentalisation of aid. Fourth, there was deliberation about the appropriate level of ambition for the peace component, depending on the realities of peace and conflict on the ground (OECD-DAC 2021), and whether the essence of peace in the nexus was to end violence or work towards resolving conflict (Ferris 2020). Taking these themes, we used an iterative process for data analysis. This meant that as we collected data, we regularly revised and adjusted lines of inquiry based on our analysis. This progressive analysis allowed for new information to inform subsequent interviews and identify emerging sub-themes, trends, and patterns.

4. Results

In this section, we first present and analyse findings related to the problem of defining peace in the nexus. Then, we discuss the operational challenges of bringing the peace component together with humanitarian and development approaches. Finally, we examine the main strategies that are being adopted to implement a triple nexus approach in practice.

4.1. *Problematizing peace*

One of our main findings is that there is widespread confusion and questions over what the addition of the peace component to humanitarian and development programming actually means in projects and what the expected outcomes are when it is included. Specifically, the fundamental questions are what (sustainable) peace actually is, what it looks like, and how, if they should, peace-making, peace-keeping, and peacebuilding fit together when considering the triple nexus – how they fit depends on political, ideological, and practical dilemmas that are always shifting.

The interviews, across all interview categories, showed that, irrespective of their specific role or organisation, there are two main views on peace. First, those implementing projects using a triple nexus approach in Islamic Relief and other INGOs see peace in the nexus as peacebuilding which includes aspects of social cohesion, community level reconciliation, and addressing local issues. The second view on peace in the triple nexus is at a more macro level – as an overarching (social

and political) strategy to build peace across a community or society. In accordance with this, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, a body for the coordination, policy development, and decision-making among multiple humanitarian partners, makes a distinction between little-p peace (peacebuilding) and big-P Peace (peace-making and peacekeeping): “We can sometimes distinguish between ‘little-p’ actions focused on building the capacity for peace within societies, and ‘big-P’ actions that support and sustain political solutions and securitised responses to violent conflict” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2020, 1). However, the concept of a “little-p” and a “big-P” is problematic for many actors because it downplays the importance of peacebuilding in communities. These varying definitions and views on peace add to the problematisation of peace and how it fits into a triple nexus approach.

This lack of (or varied) understanding of peace is described by Barakat and Milton as a primary concern for implementing the triple nexus:

One major challenge facing the triple nexus is that the category of peace is the least clearly defined and understood, in particular by the humanitarian sector. Peace is a diffuse category that encompasses a wide array of international, regional, and local actors and institutions including on the “soft” side of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the diplomatic architecture of the international system, and the “hard” side of peace in terms of security, stabilisation and peacekeeping efforts. (Barakat and Milton 2020, 152)

In order to address this confusion on understanding the peace component, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Results Group 4 on Humanitarian–Development Collaboration has sought to clarify the peace component in the triple nexus by stating that interventions in complex, protracted crises

require more risk-tolerant development actions, attention by all actors to not undermine the action of others operating in the same space, and a commitment from humanitarian actors to be reflective of how they affect longer-term actions and objectives that can reduce humanitarian need over time, and how to program in a way that also facilitates other actors’ efforts towards sustainable peace. (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2020, 16)

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee highlights that “ultimately, conflict resolution and the achievement of sustainable peace are political responsibilities and legal obligations of state governments” (Brown and Mena 2021, 14). While this is useful in highlighting the importance of aligning with long-term peace objectives, most interviewees found that it does not go far enough to clarify what exactly is meant by including peace in the nexus and where the focus should lie. For instance, should it focus on facilitating ending violence or the resolution of conflict at different levels of society? This uncertainty played out in how interviewees justified their own ambiguous or personal understanding of the concept of peace in practice, and further, how communities translated the peace component in their triple nexus projects. For example, in one project reviewed, the translation of peacebuilding resulted in the community believing that a physical building was to be built for peace.

Another challenge of peace in the nexus is that peacebuilding interventions were seen to be very sensitive. One interviewee from an INGO shared that implementing a triple nexus project in a country with high levels of central state control and an unfavourable attitude to peacebuilding interventions meant they had to communicate their peace-focused projects as Do No Harm projects to avoid government scrutiny. Similarly, there was an example given where the national government found a project with a peace component politically undermining. This was because a peace agreement had been signed and, in their eyes, the conflict had ended and peace had been established.

Furthermore, in multiple interviews across interviewee categories, the lack of clarity around the “peace” component was seen as an opportunity or an advantage because it gives considerable latitude for organisations implementing “peace” programming to decide how their mandate, the realities on the ground, their capacities, experience, and connections are best suited to support peace in each specific context. In this way, the breadth of what could fit into peacebuilding and what an organisation is able to achieve is relatively fluid and up to the organisation to define based on the contextual realities including the government’s interest in supporting “positive peace”. Findings

show that some will naturally lean towards security sector reform or disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration; others may apply their expertise to mediation or justice and governance reform; and some may use their grassroots connections to focus on social cohesion or community-based peacebuilding.

In this vein, many multi-mandated organisations are using a resilience framing to help draw the components of the triple nexus together. On the one hand, some noted this was useful in drawing activities to a higher-level intention or collective outcome that all activities could support. Others thought that the term resilience was just as broad and undefined as peace. Resilience is described by some authors as a concept that has some “potentially serious conflicts or contradictions, for example between stability and dynamisms” (Alexander 2013, 2707).

The shape that the peace component takes in a project using a triple nexus approach is logically, strongly influenced by the organisation’s position and expertise on the ground.

For instance, organisations like Islamic Relief that specialise in local humanitarian and development initiatives and have built a locally trusted presence over time, are most suited and keen to promote community-based peacebuilding and social cohesion programming, including supporting local government accountability for peace and conflict resolution. (Payne and Islamic Relief 2020)

Similarly, Oxfam frames peace as a bottom-up, community-based approach that addresses root causes (“positive peace”), rather than being framed in terms of security (“negative peace”) (OXFAM 2019). Individuals interviewed by and large thought that if the peace component is seen as peacebuilding at the community level working in partnership with national or local organisations, the peace component is not a threat to the humanitarian principles. Instead, there is an appreciation for the advantages that the addition of peace(building) offers when engaging with communities and working with them over time to address their short- and long-term needs.

4.2. Challenges in advancing the peace component

We found three primary challenges that the addition of peace has brought to the fore. The first focuses on whether the addition of peace to the humanitarian–development nexus undermines the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. The second examines how to work both with short- and long-term goals in the same project. The final challenge is the need for change in donor financial modalities if the triple nexus is to achieve its full potential.

4.2.1. Does the inclusion of the peace component undermine neutrality and impartiality?

The humanitarian principles, which have been widely adopted by international agencies and organisations working in humanitarian aid, are guiding principles for which humanitarian agencies work. They were originally put forth by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1965 and described by the International Committee of the Red Cross as their moral compass (ICRC 2021). While there are seven principles in total, there are two that are frequently discussed regarding the triple nexus. These are impartiality and neutrality.

Impartiality: It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress; and **Neutrality:** In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. (ICRC 2021)

The addition of peace to the nexus draws out the fundamental tensions between “political agendas around security and stabilisation and needs-based principled humanitarian aid” (Development Initiatives 2019, 4). The interviews revealed that this makes many aid actors wary, especially those working in the humanitarian sector. The primary concern is that the triple nexus will further instrumentalise and undermine humanitarian interventions “for political purposes or to serve military/security agendas, to the detriment of responses to needs in accordance with humanitarian

principles” (OCHA 2020, 8). This is seen as especially problematic when linking humanitarian and peace interventions because “some peacebuilding tools and interventions are not compatible with humanitarian principles. Military action against armed groups, for example, is a legitimate prerogative of states but must be kept separate from humanitarian responses” (UNOCHA 2020). As a result, there remain some “deep reservations about the peace component of the nexus and the risks associated with blurred mandates and compromised humanitarian principles” (Redvers 2019). This apprehension was presented not only by humanitarian actors during interviews but also development and peace-related actors. This includes respondents from Islamic Relief headquarters, country and regional teams, and other INGOs.

A number of interviewees, including those who focus on humanitarian interventions, felt that the principles of neutrality and impartiality should always be considered and reflected on. However, the majority of interviewees stated that the principles should not be a hinderance to a longer-term vision for meeting the needs of affected people. Furthermore, a few from international organisations and academia felt strongly that those who work in emergency relief must also at times speak out against injustices such as genocide to avoid grave crimes against humanity. Slim states that,

impartiality implies that prioritising needs is ethically easy and that human suffering can fit a simple hierarchy that clarifies “the most urgent cases of distress” as the sickest, the hungriest, and the most disrespected [...] In reality, humanitarian policy is constantly pulled between competing human need. (Slim 2021)

Interviewees across the interviewee groups often concluded that the triple nexus is one approach and may not be right in all contexts, especially those where an immediate rapid response is needed.

If fragility is to be tackled, results point to the argument that organisations which work in protracted or long-term conflicts must find ways to work together in a principled way across all components of the nexus. However, funding constraints push organisations to compete to work across as many sectors as possible without actually increasing coordination. In some cases, and especially when the peace component is primarily targeted towards peacekeeping or securitisation, maintaining neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian aid means ensuring a strong separation of peace operations from humanitarian interventions. Importantly, interviewees emphasised that there are many instances where greater collaboration would be more beneficial without neutrality and impartiality being unduly compromised, especially in some protracted conflict contexts or post-conflict contexts where communities are faced with multiple, concurrent short- and long-term challenges.

Interviewees across interview categories who were advocates for the inclusion of peace in the nexus argued that, without a focus on peace, building resilience in communities will be difficult and ending need impossible. The majority of interviewees saw the futility of only responding to emergencies without a longer-term vision to prevent their recurrence. They argued that, in reality, humanitarian aid actors need to make decisions that compromise the principles of neutrality and impartiality frequently. Among these compromises, providing assistance to parties involved in human rights abuses may be seen as condoning or enabling such actions (Orbinski 2009; Slim 2015). Likewise, many peace actors have to engage with those who have abused human rights and those who have their human rights abused. This introduces additional complexities to the notion of impartiality for triple nexus actions and actors (Leebaw 2007) along with multiple ethical dilemmas for humanitarian and development actors and actions (Leebaw 2007; Slim 2015). Achieving a way of acting amidst these challenges necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the contextual nuances, active collaboration with human rights organisations, and the identification and resolution of underlying causes of conflicts.

At the organisational level, findings show that some multi-mandated organisations (including Islamic Relief) grapple with what exactly a triple nexus approach means for the neutrality of humanitarian interventions. However, those that had explicitly defined each component (including how they might work together at the project and country strategy level), had higher levels of organisational buy-in for using the approach. As some interviewees in managerial positions shared (IRH, INGO), if the peace component is clearly defined, an organisation is then able to see more precisely

how it does or does not align with the humanitarian principles. Conversely, if peace and peacebuilding are left as vague or catch all phrases, it is difficult to be clear about its alignment with humanitarian principles. It is important to also highlight that clearly defining the peace component may also constrain its adaptability to changing dynamics.

4.2.2. Combining short- and long-term objectives

In the literature, the triple nexus is presented as a flexible approach which allows aid implementers to work more holistically with communities and adapt to their evolving needs over time. The OECD-DAC describes this as “[e]nsuring that joined-up development, peace, and humanitarian programming is risk-focused, flexible and avoids fragmentation through context-adaptable programming” (OECD-DAC 2021, 9). This was seen as one of the greatest assets of the triple nexus approach by research participants. However, it was also mentioned, that this means funding and programming processes need to be structured to enable both the delivery of short-term emergency relief at times of crisis as well as medium- to long-term development and peace support in the same locations.

Typically, peace activities are slower to gain momentum because they lack the quick, tangible outcomes that emergency relief and development projects offer, such as access to water, livelihood activities, or micro loans. In our research, interviewees stressed that establishing early wins was important in enabling project teams to move towards facilitating dialogue sessions and other peace activities that may be more sensitive and require greater trust. To quote one interviewee from an Islamic Relief country team who is implementing a project using a triple nexus approach,

Peacebuilding does not offer direct or tangible benefits in the short-term and authorities and community members are looking for and expecting them. [A triple nexus] approach allows us to offer quick benefits and still work on social cohesion which is also important.

Illustrating this, the Islamic Relief case in Pakistan found that the relatively quick humanitarian reconstruction of water infrastructure damaged during violent conflict allowed the project to meet urgent basic needs while establishing trust and working relationships with communities and local government stakeholders. Once trust was established, a project manager shared, the implementation of the more sensitive social cohesion component of its triple nexus program was able to proceed smoothly and with greater success than had initially been expected. Conversely, in The Philippines the implementation of the peace component before the livelihoods component initially caused some frustration among the local community and the sequencing of activities had to be reviewed.

When the three components work together (or in synergy), those who have implemented projects using triple nexus approaches said that there was value in being able to engage with communities on both short-term needs and long-term objectives. However, all the cases showed that combining assistance in this way is a challenge because timeframes for humanitarian, development and peace projects are often very different. Humanitarian project timeframes are typically limited to annual cycles where three- to six-month projects are common. Development projects are usually, although not always, longer, running from three to five years in length. Peace projects seek to achieve change over much longer timescales, even when funding is limited to two to three years.

Moreover, the case studies and interviews account that being able to manoeuvre between short-term emergency relief and long-term development and peace goals in a protracted conflict context is a challenging task for many reasons, including (1) funding modalities rarely provide the level of flexibility and timeframe needed; (2) each component has its own specific culture and ways of working; and (3) working with communities to meet their evolving needs is time intensive. Furthermore, actors and organisations have their specific strengths and weaknesses that can either support overcoming or exasperating complexities. To overcome these challenges, interviewees highlighted that support systems need to be fit for purpose and that staff need to be highly capable to drive adaptations. This is particularly important in triple nexus projects because they are inherently more complex, as are the contexts where they are likely to be implemented.

4.2.3. Donor financing strategies and modalities for integrating peace into the nexus

The research found that donors vary drastically in their understanding of the triple nexus as a strategy and an approach. By and large, most donor governments still have humanitarian and development (often including peacebuilding) in different departments or funding portfolios. For example, in the case of the German Government, humanitarian and development initiatives sit in two separate agencies, the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), respectively (Schröder and Schilbach 2019, 17). However, they are committed “to a comprehensive policy approach that bundles contributions by the various government departments into a joint political strategy and embarks on new ways of working for joint analysis, and joined-up strategic and operative planning” (Schröder and Schilbach 2019, 19).

In the case of the European Union, bringing together the three components meant “strengthening links between the European External Action Service, the Directorate-General ‘International Cooperation and Development’ and the Directorate-General ‘Humanitarian Aid’” (Capacity4dev 2020, 1). It is trying to bring these together using a resilience framework with joined-up goals, which was acknowledged in 2021 in the “Provisional Agreement Resulting From Interinstitutional Negotiations”, which states that early responses should “contribute to strengthening the resilience of states, societies, communities, and individuals and to linking humanitarian aid and development action and, where relevant, peacebuilding” (European Parliament 2021, 35).

In some cases, donor governments and implementing organisations such as the UN Development Program (UNDP) consider peace as a component of development. This can help to ensure that the peace component is not linked to securitisation, militarisation, and peacekeeping activities. Instead, it leans more towards “softer” forms of peacebuilding associated with civilian, human rights-based, peacebuilding approaches. On the other hand, it pushes the debate back to implementing double nexus or humanitarian development (HD) nexus programming. This is, for some interviewees and present in some literature, a more palatable combination. This is because the HD nexus has become an accepted part of the aid lexicon (European Parliament 2012). However, it risks overlooking the importance of supporting positive peace, specifically in contexts where social cohesion and levels of trust are weak between groups, as an essential element to ending need.

The third approach by donor governments is to include all three components in its programming strategies and ask those it funds to implement integrated programs which combine humanitarian, development, and peace objectives. For example, a guidance note from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency states,

The government stresses that the common goal underlines the coherence between humanitarian and development efforts as well as the importance of cooperation between the two. Also, an Operational Plan from the same agency takes the principle of ‘leave no one behind’

as a starting point and outlines that it should “develop methods, ways of working and routines that enable an effective interplay between humanitarian aid and long-term development, including peacebuilding contributions” (Sida 2020).

Donor governments including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, the United States, the Netherlands, and the European Commission include in their descriptions of peace and peacebuilding aspects of both negative and positive peace. These include such activities as mediation, stability, conflict sensitivity, security sector reform (including enforcement), and conflict prevention at all levels. This is a relatively broad understanding of “peacebuilding” which enables aid actors a wide latitude to craft an approach to the peace component which works for them, their partners, and the implementing context. This aligns with discourse that supports concepts of hybridity (see Forsyth et al. 2017; Mac Ginty 2011), whole of community approaches (see Martin, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, and Benraïs 2018), and resilience humanitarianism (see Hillhorst 2018), moving to aid actions that are less about silos and more about meeting community needs. Donors that have limited approaches

and narrow strategic mandates to supporting peace can lead to a decrease in the range of activities that organisations are able to address.

Our research found that the triple nexus is more viable when funding from a donor is merged to focus on the overall outcomes where the outputs can change. At a minimum, the funding needs to be extremely flexible to ebb and flow within the nexus and the three components. For example, some interviewees from donor agencies and INGOs indicated that siloed structures and bureaucracies within individual donor agencies, and in recipient countries, need to be overcome with a view to move towards pooled funding (in-country) or combined funding streams (within individual donor agencies) in support of strategic objectives. At the same time, it is important to keep flexibility for implementers to deliver short-term, often unplanned, relief.

4.3. Ways forward

Our interviews and literature review brought to light a number of potential ways forward for the triple nexus, addressing its challenges and fostering its opportunities.

First, the humanitarian principles can and do work within a triple nexus approach when each component of the nexus and its activities are clearly defined in a way that complements one another and feed into an overarching higher-level goal. The primary impasse for most interviewees is the peace component of the nexus given its association with security actions and politics. This can be overcome when a program or project is clear on how it specifically approaches and defines peace in the contexts of the communities where a triple nexus approach is being used.

Second, while combining short- and long-term timeframes and activities is a challenge, it was also highlighted as an advantage and opportunity for projects using a triple nexus approach. It allows one initiative to both deliver immediate emergency relief when necessary and, at the same time, focus on a long-term goal. It requires actors and activities to have short- and long-term timeframes, thus potentially offering a way to better address the needs of communities in a more holistic manner.

Third, while, in some instances, donor financing strategies and models are starting to shift, including in Sweden (Sida 2020), the United Kingdom (Development Initiatives 2019), Germany (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development 2021), Austria (OECD 2023), Ireland (OECD 2020), and the European Union (Vernon and Hauck 2021), among others, they are reportedly still too rigid and bureaucratic and tied to political agendas to be able to adequately accommodate triple nexus approaches. Donors, as well as organisations with flexible funding, need to look for ways to ensure each component is adequately financed as a necessary part of the whole when a triple nexus approach is being pursued. Thus, new financing strategies and models need to be supported, promoted, and encouraged.

5. Conclusions

The long-standing, and often protracted, nature of most conflicts has brought to the fore the need to address crises in more comprehensive ways. This means addressing people's humanitarian and development needs while, at the same time, promoting and sustaining peace. Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, this idea has gained and sustained support, leading to the development of policy guidance, recommendations, and strategies from bi-, multi-, and international organisations. To ensure longevity of the approach, the push continues for systematic change in the international aid system to link and improve the coordination between humanitarian, development, and peace actions and actors. The result is the so-called triple nexus.

Multiple organisations have begun to implement projects using a triple nexus approach and lessons are being gathered on challenges and successes which are pushing for change in the system to improve effectiveness. Donors have begun to adjust financial strategies and models to fund this coordinated and adaptable way of working. However, multiple challenges have proven

the need for more research and knowledge on the triple nexus to more fully understand how to overcome these challenges and embrace the opportunities. Among these hindrances, the inclusion and definition of the peace component have proven to raise the most red flags, while, at the same time, offering many opportunities for ensuring long-term goals are reached. This research has sought to contribute to the understanding of the triple nexus by examining (1) how the peace component in the nexus interplays and affects the humanitarian principles; (2) how triple nexus approaches adapt to the different timescales inherent in emergency, development, and peace projects; and (3) how different donor financing strategies and funding modalities integrate peace.

We answer these questions by studying multiple project cases that are using a triple nexus approach, primarily from Islamic Relief and its projects in Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In terms of methods, we conducted interviews and a systematic literature review. Due to biases in the literature and the origin of discussions promoting the triple nexus, a limitation of this study is the prevailing Western viewpoint and framing of the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus. As mentioned earlier, Western donors and actors have been prominent in leading the discussion and promotion of this nexus, but it's important to note that they are not the sole contributors to the process. Therefore, to counterbalance this bias, the study incorporates voices from various regions through both interviews and reports. Nevertheless, the literature on the topic still reflects this imbalance, a situation we aim to address in both this and future studies.

In terms of findings, our study shows that there is still some work to be done to get the most out of the triple nexus approach. It also highlights that there are already some gains demonstrated by organisations that have explicitly been using triple nexus approaches in project implementation. As was regularly stated in literature and by interviewees, for decades, many organisations have been using integrated approaches when it makes sense in a given context, and when they have the expertise, the flexibility, and funding to do so.

To overcome challenges and be able to implement projects with a triple nexus approach, our findings pointed towards the following priorities for change. First, organisations that are planning to either fund or use triple nexus approaches need to define how they engage in peace activities. Donor and implementing organisations would also benefit from greater clarity around how they see each component of the triple nexus linking to others, both in concept and in practice.

Second, organisations would benefit from ensuring that in strategies, there are higher-level goals and objectives beyond emergency relief, development, or peace – goals that link the components together. Even organisations that prioritise one area or only work in one area of the nexus would benefit from thinking through how their efforts work towards ending long-term need. Regardless of the type of organisation, country offices, should, when possible, align their efforts to overarching international and national goals and agendas. In many contexts, these will include the three components of the triple nexus.

Third, projects and donors must examine how adaptable they are willing to be and which systems need to change to better enable adaptability. For instance, how can funding be shifted from one area to another when there is an unplanned occurrence in a community, such as drought, disease, or an outbreak of violence? Systems change includes finding new ways to measure adaptable projects with both short-term and long-term outputs. It also includes reviewing partnership models with national and local partners to support integrated programming locally. Actors implementing projects that use a triple nexus approach will also have to engage and navigate the political elements inherent in donor agendas as well as the politics involved in addressing conflict, and in building and maintaining peace.

Fourth, it is important to recognise that the triple nexus is an approach and, like all approaches, has strengths and weaknesses and may be a better fit in some contexts than others. Specifically, our research showed that, in contexts that have protracted conflicts, there is a need for all three components of the nexus and often in the same communities. In communities where there are multiple actors, there is still a need for greater incentives to coordinate and collaborate. The triple nexus can provide a mechanism to do this.

Last, and perhaps most importantly, this research found consistently that the triple nexus demands that the international aid system continues to shift to meet communities where they are. The humanitarian principles are useful in establishing a foundation to help move the aid system to a place of principled aid in every type of action and intervention regardless of what we label them. Similarly, the addition of peace, is pushing the aid sector to consider the long-term end game in every type of intervention. For the system to improve, we must continue to break down barriers that hinder overall effectiveness so that there is increased focus on collective outcomes and ending need.

Notes

1. Good examples of the process can be seen in Mosel and Levine, “Remaking the Case for Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development”; Otto and Weingärtner, “IOB Study – Linking Relief and Development – More than Old Solutions for Old Problems?”; and Stevens et al., “Understanding the Relationship Between Humanitarian and Development Interventions”.
2. Triple nexus is used interchangeably with humanitarian–development–peace nexus and HDP nexus in discourse and projects.
3. Other organisations and adoption dates: European Union (22/02/2019), International Organisation for Migration (20/10/2020), United Nations Children’s Fund (24/09/2020), United Nations Development Programme (16/04/2020), United Nations Population Fund (19/11/2020), and the World Food Programme (24/09/2020). For list of all signatories including member states, see DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus, accessed 15 March 2021.

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