THE NEXUS IN PRACTICE:
THE LONG JOURNEY TO IMPACT

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1 PURPOSE

NRC's water distribution site in Hanano, Somalia, which is part of the larger emergency drought response. ©Abdulkadir Mohamed/NRC

With funding from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), this research aims to examine the operationalization of the Nexus approach, as defined in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) recommendations on the Nexus (OECD, 2019), in five case studies, namely Libya, Iraq, Cameroon, Somalia and Afghanistan. The aim is to examine if and how the Nexus approach has been operationalized in these fragile and conflict-affected contexts, as well as the approach's implications for principled humanitarian action (PHA).[1] While the global policy discussions on the Nexus have remained somewhat theoretical, this research aims to bring practical field examples, good practice and lessons learned to the table to inform evidence-based decision-making on the advancement of the Nexus.

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[1] Humanitarian action in adherence to the four Humanitarian Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Independence. https://rb.gy/5vipd

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 FINDINGS FROM THE EXAMINED CASE STUDIES

Nexus: different practices

As already found in previous research,[2] while the Nexus is a clear concept in theory, in practice, there are diverging views on how to operationalise the approach. In examining five diverse case studies, several different approaches to the Nexus emerged, including the Nexus as the development of country-specific tools and coordination mechanisms; the Nexus as a transition process away from the humanitarian response and coordination system; and the Nexus as a policy request for complementary development financing to address the structural causes that drive needs in protracted crisis contexts. These diverse approaches underscore the need for global policy guidance on how the Nexus should be operationalised at country level.

Complementary development investments in fragile and protracted crisis countries

Humanitarian interventions are widely credited with saving thousands of lives in the extremely fragile and protracted crisis contexts of Somalia and Afghanistan. This research, however, highlighted the negative consequences of overreliance on short-term humanitarian interventions that are often provided repeatedly to the same populations without "graduating" these to longer-term outcomes. Interviewees for this report consistently emphasised that humanitarian assistance alone cannot respond to all the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of affected populations in complex, protracted crisis contexts. In line with global policy commitments, there is a need for greater political will to invest complementary development funds that address the structural causes driving needs. With the growing global humanitarian funding gap,

interviewees for this report also raised concerns about the cost-efficiency of continuing to spend millions of dollars annually on humanitarian responses in Afghanistan and Somalia that do not fundamentally improve the status quo, prevent future crises or build the resilience of affected communities.

The Nexus and localization: bottom-up or top-down?

The five case studies demonstrated diverging approaches to localisation and local leadership. The importance of linking localisation commitments and the advancement of Nexus approaches was underscored.

In the transitional case of Libya, national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) were largely excluded from the new post-transition Nexus coordination structure. This was not the case in Iraq, where NNGOs and government authorities were represented in area-based coordination groups (ABCs) and NNGOs were granted seats in some working groups under the durable solutions structure. Despite being heavily affected by the implications of the transition away from a humanitarian response and coordination structure, NNGOs and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in both Libya and Iraq reported a lack of meaningful inclusion and consultation in the transition process, which was described as "top-down and UN driven".

In the protracted crisis contexts of Somalia and Afghanistan, the overreliance on short-term humanitarian emergency interventions was found to create parallel, internationally driven systems that risk eroding local capacities and leadership. Despite challenges of corruption and limited government capacity in these contexts, and donor governments not wanting to legitimize the Afghan authorities, operational actors in both

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[2]   For example, the 2019 report 'Financing the Nexus' published by FAO, NRC and UNDP (2019): https://rb.gy/u6gf9 and Development Initiatives series 'Supporting longer term development in crises at the nexus', with lessons learned from 1) Bangladesh https://rb.gy/pbic8; 2) Somalia https://rb.gy/spqz5 and 3) Cameroon https://rb.gy/excxt

contexts consistently emphasised that the only sustainable way forward for the response is strengthening local capacities and resilience. The solutions to Afghanistan and Somalia's challenges need to be locally anchored, which supports longer-term development investments in complementarity to principled humanitarian interventions.

In contrast to the other case study in this research, Cameroon applied a bottom-up, localised approach to operationalising the Nexus. National actors, authorities and NGOs were represented in the regional and national Nexus task forces that steer the Nexus process. Rather than a country-wide Nexus transition, a localised approach was adopted to facilitate Nexus approaches in 12 selected convergence areas in the Eastern façade and Extreme North part of Cameroon. This community-level focus and its links to existing municipal development plans were seen by interviewees as positive in fostering local leadership and ownership. It should be noted, however, that activities have not been implemented under the Nexus process in Cameroon and, for that reason, it is not possible to speak about the impact of this bottom-up approach to the Nexus.

Coordination, tools and systems

The case studies highlighted the question of whether Nexus approaches require the development of new tools, structures and coordination mechanisms, or whether the Nexus can be achieved by adapting current systems and coordination architecture.

Despite the appreciation for the localised and area-based approach adopted in Cameroon, the process appeared to have come to a standstill by November 2022. This was found to have been caused by several factors, including the departure of a humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) coordinator appointed by the UN Office of the Resident Coordinator (RCO) and the lack of funding for key positions and processes. Another key factor was the decision to develop a number of tools and coordination structures specifically to support the localised operationalising of the Nexus. This was cumbersome, and despite the considerable resources and the time invested by UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the start of the Nexus process in 2019, the Nexus approach had not delivered any

tangible results to affected communities by June 2023. This led some interviewees to suggest that the Nexus approach in Cameroon should rather have been based on existing tools and systems.

At the same time, this research uncovered an emerging "grey zone" between humanitarian and development interventions. Rather than repeated, short-term emergency assistance, the protracted nature of needs and displacement in contexts like Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq called for more sustainable interventions. This raises questions about which actors are best placed to implement such "grey zone" interventions, as well as how those are best financed and coordinated. The humanitarian cluster system has been relatively effective in coordinating life-saving assistance and protection to people in need during and in the immediate aftermath of conflicts and disasters. The clusters may not, however, be the appropriate structure to coordinate more sustainable interventions in protracted crisis settings and support the strengthening of local capacities to prepare for an eventual transition towards development and recovery responses.

While the development of country-specific tools and coordination may be beyond the capacity of country teams, the current siloed coordination structures between humanitarian and development actors are not fit for purpose and do not incentivise coordinated approaches across HDP actors. This finding speaks to the ongoing system reform agenda, which looks at how to adapt existing systems to better accommodate the "grey-zone" that is missing from the current coordination architecture.

The role of humanitarian actors in the "grey-zone"

Rather than handing over activities or working in partnership with development actors, humanitarian and dual-mandate actors were found to increasingly expand activities into the "grey zone" between the humanitarian and development pillars in protracted crisis contexts. This was justified by the obligation to respond to emergency needs and work towards longer-term outcomes, such as self-reliance and durable solutions in protracted crisis contexts, as well as the limited presence of development actors. This expansion of roles was also exacerbated by the current donor-driven, project-based funding system that leads to negative competition between

implementing actors and fails to foster the necessary collaboration, coordination and synergies across HDP pillars. Humanitarian INGOs were criticised by some donors for using the Nexus approach as a "fundraising tool", and not providing thought-leadership and challenge the status quo to ensure the best possible response for affected populations.

Nexus transitions or humanitarian exits?

Despite clear contextual differences, comparative findings from Libya and Iraq demonstrate similarities in decision-making and implementation processes of the countries' transitions away from a humanitarian response and coordination structure. These lessons can be applied to inform future transitions in other contexts.

The transitions in both contexts were justified by a decline in humanitarian needs and humanitarian funding, as well as the countries' middle-income status. These factors were used to argue that the countries' governments should be able to respond to the needs of their people. In practice, however, government authorities were found to lack the willingness and capacity to provide services and protect all population groups, with concerns that vulnerable groups would be excluded from a system-level, government-led response.

Although there had been prior discussions of a transition away from a humanitarian response in both Iraq and Libya, the transition processes were described as "rushed". There were only four to five months between the endorsement of the decision by the humanitarian country team (HCT) and the deactivation of all clusters by the end of 2022. This short timeframe was found to be inadequate to strengthen technical capacities among government and development counterparts to ensure a responsible handover of coordination responsibilities. Along with the rapid decline in humanitarian funding, the rushed timeline led many interviewees to question whether the process could be defined as a transition, or whether it was rather an abrupt exit of the humanitarian response justified under the "HDP Nexus" or "solutions" agenda.

In both contexts, NGOs also consistently reported a limited space for meaningful influence in the decision-making and implementation processes around the transition, which were found to be driven unilaterally by the UN leadership with

support from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Given NGOs' significant operational footprint, this lack of influence was described as a missed opportunity for ensuring that the realities of affected communities were represented in the decision-making process. The lack of a clear strategy or blueprint prior to embarking on the transition further added to the confusion and lack of transparency around the process.

Protection requires special attention

This research found that a dedicated and resourced protection working group was needed in the transitional cases of Iraq and Libya to sustain capacities for protection monitoring, analysis and advocacy following the deactivation of the protection cluster or sector. A separate protection working group is particularly critical in contexts where the government has been a perpetrator of protection violations or where government policies have contributed to the protection risks facing certain groups.

To avoid the centrality of protection becoming a tick-the-box exercise without real accountability mechanisms, the Iraq and Libya cases demonstrate that transition processes need sufficient time and dedicated technical capacities. It is crucial to ensuring that development and government actors are able to design and implement protection-sensitive interventions that prevent the most at-risk population groups from falling between the cracks when there is a transition out of a humanitarian response.

Donors and financing: from policy commitments to practice

Across the examined contexts, donors were found to have taken few steps to accommodate and operationalize the commitments made under the OECD DAC recommendations on the Nexus. Although many donors have made clear policy commitments, these were not found to have resulted in a change of practice at scale.

There was an absence of systemic coordination between development and humanitarian donors in all examined contexts. At times, even development and humanitarian programmes funded by the same donor government appeared uncoordinated and opportunities for coherence

and layered interventions were missed. Donors lacked the flexibility to adapt pre-set priorities to accommodate joined-up planning and actions across the HDP pillars.

Despite policy commitments for development actors to stay-and-deliver, donors were found in practice to lack the political will and risk appetite to invest sufficient development funds in extremely fragile and conflict-affected contexts like Somalia and Afghanistan. In these cases, humanitarian funding was overstretched in an attempt to respond to all needs and provide basic services, without sufficient complementary development investments that address root causes, prevent future crises and promote sustainable recovery and solutions. When development and humanitarian funds were invested in the same country, like in Iraq, Cameroon and Somalia, they tended to target separate geographic areas or different population groups, which did not allow for needed laying of interventions that would support longer-term outcomes and durable solutions for affected populations.

Lastly, it was found that donors have taken few steps to live up to their commitments under the OECD DAC recommendations on the Nexus and make long-term, flexible and predictable financing available in fragile contexts.[3] Many NGOs and UN agencies were said to continue relying on unpredictable and short-term financing, and, in the case of NGOs, highly earmarked, project-based, humanitarian grants.

Definition of the peace pillar

The peace component has been the most contested and least defined of the three HDP Nexus pillars across contexts and has led humanitarian actors to fear potential risks to the PHA and humanitarian space. In the case of Cameroon, a document was drafted in the early stage of the Nexus process, clearly defining the peace pillar as conflict sensitivity and social cohesion, while excluding any responses linked to militarised or security interventions. This clear definition of the peace pillar was found to contribute to high levels of buy-in among humanitarian actors and should be considered as a potentially good practice for other contexts in which the Nexus is being operationalised.

2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Humanitarian and development donors, and other financing actors

1. **Use financing to enable Nexus approaches:** As has been documented in this and previous research (e.g. FAO, NRC and UNDP (2019) "Financing the Nexus"), financing remains a key barrier to advancing the Nexus. If donors and international financial institutions (IFIs) want to put the global policy asks on advancing the Nexus into practice, they should use financing tools to incentivize and scale collaboration and coherence across the HDP pillars. This can happen with existing budgets and through existing funding mechanisms, like pooled funds, multi-donor programs and consortiums. It can also happen through new mechanisms that leverage new sources of financing. Creating more tightly earmarked pots of "Nexus funding", however, is unlikely to advance the approach effectively.

2. **Increase complementary development investments:** Donors and IFIs should increasingly invest development funding in areas that are directly affected by fragility and conflict, with efforts to intentionally layer these interventions with those of humanitarian actors to promote more sustainable solutions and recovery and reduce dependence on humanitarian assistance.

   To do so, development donors should consider the following sub-recommendations:

   2.A Increase risk tolerance and ensure shared targeting: Development donors and IFIs should increase their risk tolerance for development investments and ensure that they target the same geographical regions and population groups as humanitarian interventions. The newly released risk sharing framework could represent an opportunity for introducing improvements (ICRC et. al., 2023).

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[3]   This is also in line with the findings from the Grand Bargain Review from 2022, which recommended for the signatories to increase the volume and proportion of flexible funding (Metcalfe-Hough et. al, 2023).

2.B Consider alternative partners: Development donors and IFIs should consider increasingly partnering with UN agencies and NGOs when the government is not deemed an appropriate or capacitated partner, instead of freezing development funds or investing in safer regions of the country. This approach may compromise the sustainability of the intervention, as the responsibility for project activities might not be handed over to government authorities. Alternative partners, however, are often the only viable options for operating in extremely fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

2.C Ensure a people-centred approach: To ensure that no one is left behind in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, development actors may need to move away from a state-building approach, where collaboration with a stable government is a prerequisite for investment, to a people-centred methodology that targets the world's most vulnerable.

3. **Improve donor coordination across the HDP pillars:** It is recommended that systemic coordination is ensured between development and humanitarian donors at country level, which should include IFIs wherever possible. This should be accompanied by donor financing modalities that allow for greater flexibility to adapt priorities and ensure coherence between development and humanitarian interventions.

4. **Increase quality funding:** Donors should live up to their commitments under the OECD DAC recommendations on the Nexus and make long-term, flexible, and predictable funding available in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Development donors should consider incorporating crisis modifiers into grants. Flexible funding is also key for real-time responsiveness to needs related to climate-specific vulnerabilities and to allow for the rapid-responses necessary to contend with the uncertainty of the climate crisis.

5. **Make climate financing available:** Some fragile and conflict-affected contexts are also among those most severely affected by the consequences of climate change. For that reason, donor governments should ensure that these contexts have access to climate financing that allows interventions to adjust to the new realities of the climate crisis. To the extend possible, climate actors should be engaged in coordination of responses in fragile and conflict affected contexts.

INGOs and UN agencies

6. **Stick to comparative advantage:** While acknowledging that in certain hard-to-reach contexts, humanitarian actors are the only operational actors, INGOs and UN agencies should avoid using the Nexus to expand their activities mandates. In line with the OECD DAC recommendations, operational actors should stick to their comparative advantage and ask if others would be better placed to respond to specific needs. This may involve a considerable shift in mindset for implementing actors, and relies on development actors stepping up their engagement in fragile contexts. The Nexus approach calls for increased collaboration, coordination and partnership between HDP actors with complementary skills. Consortiums were highlighted as a good practice to foster collaboration and reduce competition between INGOs and UN agencies.

7. **Provide thought-leadership:** NGOs and UN agencies should challenge the status quo and provide thought-leadership to ensure that affected people have access to the highest quality interventions, are enabled to achieve self-reliance, and supported to find durable solutions. There is a need to align global policy asks with actions on the ground, which calls for the courage to "do what we say", even if that means turning down funds or challenging donor positions.

UN leadership

8. **Ensure donor buy-in:** Financing was found to be a key barrier to operationalization of the Nexus approach. For that reason, it is recommended that the UN leadership cultivate donor buy-in and commitments to fund activities across HDP pillars before embarking on the implementation of Nexus approaches or transitions.

9. **Ensure clarity on how to operationalize the Nexus:** While acknowledging that some guidance is under development,[4] this research underlined the need for clarity and agreement on how the Nexus is to be operationalized at a country level. This includes agreement on what the approach encompasses, such as whether the Nexus refers to tools, coordination structures and/or processes, as well as a clear understanding of leadership, roles and responsibilities. The need for greater clarity on how to operationalise the Nexus was already a recommendation in the FAO, NRC and UNDP Financing the Nexus report from 2019, which demonstrates a lack of follow up and action.

10. **Clearly define the peace pillar:** The peace pillar remains the least defined pillar of the HDP Nexus approach and it has been interpreted to mean anything from conflict sensitivity to stabilization and politically negotiated peace processes. As was the case in Cameroon, it is recommended that the peace pillar be clearly defined within the Nexus approach in each specific country context to ensure alignment with humanitarian actors' commitments to neutrality and impartiality. The peace pillar should also be defined at a global policy level in a way that ensures humanitarian actors' ability to adhere to PHA.

11. **Address the "grey zone" in ongoing system reforms:** The current coordination system, siloed between humanitarian and development actors, is not fit for purpose for the emerging grey-zone in protracted crisis contexts. This should be addressed in the ongoing system reform agenda, either by adapting existing systems or creating new, more appropriate coordination structures, systems and tools. Consortiums and area-based approaches emerged as good practice, and innovative, flexible funding modalities should be tested and brought to scale.

12. **Prepare cluster deactivation earlier:** In keeping with the reference to good practice in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster Coordination Reference Module (IASC, 2015), HCTs and cluster leads should prepare for an eventual cluster deactivation from the onset of a humanitarian response in order to strengthen national preparedness and response capacities for an eventual handover of responsibilities. Where a deactivation is on the horizon, an adequate timeframe should be established to allow for an effective and responsible transition of responsibilities. To ensure that humanitarian space is preserved, ongoing system reform processes should consider how humanitarian coordination can better link with relevant government structures to avoid creating parallel, internationally driven systems.

13. **Improve accountability mechanisms:** There should be stronger accountability mechanisms for the performance of UN leadership at the country level. Reviews and evaluations have stressed the need for improved leadership and accountability. The absence of a global performance mechanism, however, has weakened the overall impact of these findings. The creation of an accountability process or tool could help in meeting some of the challenges identified in this research.

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4   For example, the ISAC Task Force 4 - Guidance note for Global Clusters (2023); INCAF - Coordination across the Nexus in fragile and conflict affected contexts (2021); OECD DAC recommendations on the Nexus (2019); IASC Task Force 4 – mapping of good practice (to be published).

UN Country leadership and donors in transitional contexts

14. **Ensure a blueprint in advance of transitions:** A clear strategy should be in place before embarking on a transition process from a humanitarian to a Nexus and/or development response and coordination structure. A blueprint for the transition makes the process more transparent and clear and facilitates better feedback opportunities on the proposed process from implicated stakeholders. The timeframe for the transition presented in the blueprint must allow for a responsible transition of coordination responsibilities in order to limit any loss of knowledge and expertise.

15. **Phase cluster deactivation:** Not all clusters are equally prepared or have equally capacitated counterparts to facilitate a transition of coordination responsibilities. In line with the IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module (IASC, 2015), it is recommended that cluster deactivations be phased in transitional contexts against pre-established criteria on improvements in the humanitarian situation and national preparedness to take over responsibilities.

16. **Sustain and resource the UN leadership:** To ensure consistency in transitions, UN leadership teams and OCHA should be sustained and resourced throughout the process. In cases where OCHA is supporting the transition, it should wait to scale down its response until the transition has been implemented and new coordination structures are in place.

17. **Increase inclusivity:** While the RC/HC is best placed to lead transition processes, meaningful consultation with NGOs in the design and implementation of the transition process, is strongly recommended. As operational actors with extensive contextual understanding, NGOs provide added value to UN decision-making processes, and yet are too-often excluded from these strategic discussions. It is also strongly recommended that NNGOs and CSOs be included in transitions processes to ensure sustainability and local leadership of new coordination structures.

18. **Pay particular attention to protection:** Protection should be given particular attention in transitions to government-led development and/or Nexus coordination structures, and an independent mechanism to monitor protection concerns and conduct protection advocacy should be sustained and resourced. This is particularly critical in contexts where the government has been a perpetrator of protection violations or where government policies have contributed to the protection risks facing certain groups. Development and government actors must have measures in place to promote protection sensitive programming to prevent the centrality of protection from becoming a tick-the-box exercise without real accountability mechanisms.

19. **Ensure a strong NGO forum:** A strong NGO forum was found to be essential in influencing transition processes through advocacy and strategic engagement with the UN country leadership. NGO forums should be resourced throughout transition processes to allow the NGO community to speak with one voice and meaningfully impact design and implementation around transitions.

20. **Sustain funding across the HDP pillars:** In keeping with the IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module, cluster deactivation should not mean an end to humanitarian funding for a context in which humanitarian actors should remain in capacity to respond to residual needs. For that reason, donors should sustain funding across all three HDP pillars throughout the transition process.