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THE TRIPLE NEXUS – THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY FOR THE HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES?

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May 2020

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Abstract

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP or Triple Nexus) brings three sectors into closer alignment to better address poverty and conflict, the underlying causes of crisis. At the same time, it deals with people's urgent needs. Humanitarians have objected, at times sharply, to the implementation and even conceptual basis of this policy initiative. A central concern is that the humanitarian principles require distance from the inherently political aspirations and workings of development and peace. Yet, this discussion paper argues that the principles are flexible, that they envision the compromise and negotiation necessary to make the Triple Nexus work.

More ambitiously, the paper sees the potential for the Nexus to improve the humanitarian sector's operational impact and its respect for its principles. It further identifies the principles as a chance to ground the Nexus in people-centric approaches that supplement the top-down focus on institutions. Specifically, rather than focus on intersectoral linkages, two propositions are made to address the underlying ideological blockage within the silo of humanitarian action. First, the necessity of exploring how 'Nexus-thinking' can strengthen humanitarian programming and realisation of its principles by enlarging the scope and time dimension of the sector's analysis. Nexus-thinking will thus push humanitarians to reduce negative consequences and better address rather than dismiss the most important needs of people. Second, the sector must capitalise on Nexus-thinking to help strengthen the value, interpretation, and operationalisation of its principles, in particular the principle of humanity. Central to humanity lies human dignity, and central to a life of human dignity lie development and peace. The principle of humanity thus offers a potential common ground for discussion across the sectors, and challenges humanitarians to build a new relationship to development and peace.

1. Old Wine in a New Bottle

One group of humanitarian observers dismisses the humanitarian-development-peace Nexus (HDP-Nexus) as neither ambitious nor new, yet another 'transformational' fad that amounts to 'old wine in a new bottle'. For others, though, the wine is new, an infusion of peacebuilding to the more recognisable vintage of the humanitarian-development Nexus. The new bottle is also worrying – it foretells change. A long-floundering conceptual policy, the HDP Nexus now unfurls in a constellation of 'ongoing structural shifts across the aid system' (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019: 6) seeking to 'transform' how aid is planned, financed and implemented (Macrae 2019).

The intended transformation? At the heart of the international community, a reconfiguration of three mutually antagonistic sectoral silos in order to jointly deliver a sustainable end to crisis vulnerabilities and address the underlying causes of structural poverty, inequality and conflict.[1] The HDP Nexus is not a trivial undertaking.

This new bottle of wine sparks a mixture of high praise, grudging endorsement, concern, confusion and strident rejection. Among fans and opponents alike, though, a common thread is the certainty that the humanitarian principles impose either strict limits upon or irreconcilable obstacles to the mixing of H with either D or P. For some, this constitutes an existential threat that requires rejection and sectoral distancing. Are the humanitarian principles a fatal flaw in the implementation or even conceptual foundation of the HDP Nexus? This paper explores a different way of thinking about that relationship.

The first section highlights the nature of the Nexus and the issues related to the humanitarian principles. The paper then challenges elements of this critique as a misreading of how the sector understands the principles to work. Moving beyond accepted doctrine, the paper proposes a different interaction between the HDP Nexus and the humanitarian principles, one built upon 'Nexus-thinking' – thinking through the lens of the Nexus – and a more progressive reading of the principles. Limited in scope and not intended as a research paper, its purpose is to spark discussion.

2. The HDP Nexus

The recent emergence of the Nexus stems from a number of major policy frameworks that coalesce around the ambition to provide relief from immediate crisis and ensure that the vulnerabilities and causes of crisis are resolved over time. These include the United Nations' 'New Way of Working' to overcome the inadequacies of divided efforts, the focus of the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs') overarching aim to leave no one behind, and the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit's (WHS) Grand Bargain, which promises shifts in financing and investment in order to bolster prevention and preparedness measures.[2]

For the humanitarian – development nexus, these current initiatives can be traced historically from the late 1980s, from Linking Relief Reconstruction and Development (LRRD) through Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), coherence (the 'integrated framework'), and the resilience agenda. The addition

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[1] No single agreed definition of the Triple Nexus exists, but they have in common a breadth of scope and a long-term frame of reference. For example, the OECD-DAC's definition of the purpose: 'to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict.' (OECD-DAC 2019: 6). Throughout the text the terms 'Nexus', 'HDP Nexus' and 'Triple Nexus' are used interchangeably unless stated otherwise.

[2] Other factors also pushed in the direction of the Nexus, such as the West's preoccupation with escalating displacement and migration and the ever-widening gap between the global humanitarian budget and global humanitarian needs.

of peacebuilding – essentially a directive from Secretary General Antonio Guterres – also has historical roots, for example in the narrative of 'human security' (Macrae 2019).

This briefest of histories offers two lessons for understanding the tension between the humanitarian principles and the HDP Nexus (or 'Triple Nexus'). First, that it is primarily conceptualised and implemented as a set of top-down institutional changes, designed to remove barriers and promote coordination across key United Nations (UN) agencies. Second, that it promulgates significant change at the structural level without addressing the underlying institutional power dynamics, ideology and culture that have hindered (lesser) nexus-like initiatives over the past three decades. These two points drive much of the discussion below. The use of the principles to distance humanitarian action from the Nexus overemphasises the first and it resides in the second, an unaddressed ideological obstacle.

Although the HDP Nexus originated in the corridors of the UN, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have joined. Reports highlight a number of successful efforts at linking humanitarian programming with development efforts (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019; Thomas 2019; Kittaneh 2018), and significant support exists for measures such as multi-year funding (Thomas 2019), greater attention to reducing recurrent shocks, prevention and early action (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019), and scaled-up development work in protracted crises (ICVA 2018). Reports also attest to concerns such as the lack of clear definitions and the continued distance of local actors from Nexus decision-making (Thomas 2019; Tronc et al. 2019; Macrae 2019).

Beyond these issues related to effective implementation, the humanitarian sector[3] has also questioned the wisdom of the Nexus tout court, proclaiming substantial risk to the humanitarian principles and thereby to operational access in the most important crises of the day. The addition of peacebuilding only exacerbated humanitarian anxiety. As one stakeholder in VOICE's research noted, 'in peace, humanitarian principles vanished.' (Thomas 2019: 21). Opposition to the Triple Nexus further includes fears that the sector will be 'subsumed' (Tronc et al. 2019) or 'fused' with the transformative state-building agenda of development, or become an instrument within stabilisation efforts, the global security agenda or violent political conflict. Yet, protracted violent conflict is the main reason for today's crises and among the main motives for the inclusion of peace in the humanitarian-development Nexus.

The addition of peacebuilding only exacerbated humanitarian anxiety.

The particular and substantial problem of protracted crises

A full two-thirds of humanitarian assistance goes to people in protracted crises (Kittaneh et al. 2018): conflict situations that produce prolonged displacement and destruction and where the crisis' 'cumulative impact' affects 'all sectors' of society and then gradually degrades human dignity and deepens poverty (ICRC 2016). Compounding these problems, restrictions on development funding pose a significant obstacle to development work in protracted crises (ICRC 2016). In many ways, the Triple Nexus recognises that humanitarian action is unfit for purpose in protracted crises, even those labelled as 'humanitarian'.[4] This mismatch has resulted from humanitarians being pushed to fill gaps by stretching their mandates and expertise in crises where development work was not taking place (Thomas 2019: 18).

Even so, the deeply political objection of humanitarians – imposed and non-participatory – to 'doing development' or 'doing peace' requires sharper interrogation from the 'apolitical' sector. After all, these are the expressed needs of the people, deceptively eclipsed but not addressed by the single-mindedness of urgent life-saving activities. If aid is founded bottom-up upon the needs of people, this imposed 'it's not our job' riposte seems ethically deficient where peacebuilding and development remain absent for decades. As ADESO director Degan Ali opined in regard to fragile states, 'we still really need to get out of this short-termism, which simply creates a terrible dependency on aid.'[5]

In the needs-based approach of impartiality, these circumstances suggest a duty and a justification to act in the absence of others. This requires a shift of ideology: for humanitarians to see the Nexus of human need as imposing a human imperative to move beyond an agency's self-proclaimed 'mandate', or at the least to account for the impact of its deliberate 'restraint' over time.

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3. The thorny problem of the humanitarian principles

The conclusion drawn from a recent study of the Triple Nexus in Mali demonstrates the seriousness of the stakes. 'Mali may indeed be emblematic of a context in which international actors should push in the opposite direction of the "Triple Nexus"' (Tronc et al. 2019: 31). The solution involves 'disaggregating' humanitarian from development and peacebuilding work at 'both the conceptual and operational level', which is deemed 'crucial to local acceptance of humanitarian actors, and hence, to programmatic effectiveness.' (Tronc et al. 2019: 27).

Speaking in 2015, then ICRC President Peter Maurer set forth in more measured terms an equivalent humanitarian position.

> In theory we all share the same aspirations for global peace, development and security, as well as the understanding about the limits of humanitarian action in addressing or preventing the causes of crisis. In practice however, our experience shows that emergency access to vulnerable populations […] depends on the ability to isolate humanitarian goals from other transformative goals, be they economic, political, social or human rights related. (Maurer 2015: 451).

At the core of this friction lie the humanitarian principles. They function to define the purpose of humanitarian action (humanity), its central ethic (impartiality) and their operational requirements (neutrality and independence). Concerns in the sector appear focused on these last two: clarity is sought on 'how humanitarian actors can remain neutral and independent despite the linkage to the state that the nexus implies.' (ICVA 2018: 3).

One cannot ignore the risks of humanitarians working conjointly with certain political and armed actors. The principles are designed to help avoid this. Even if the language used by political sponsors of the HDP Nexus such as the European Union uniformly declare the sanctity of the humanitarian principles, there is concern that the reality on the ground signifies an increasing risk of political and security demands trumping the ideals of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the principles (Thomas 2019; Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019).

Moreover, the lack of definitional clarity on the Nexus' intentions and the ambiguity of its meaning – collaboration, coordination, linkage, alignment, complementarity, operationality, reconfiguration, fusion, integration or joined-uppedness? – cloud discussions. The relationship to peacebuilding is particularly and problematically clouded. For humanitarians in a given context to work towards even a basic complementarity to peacebuilding strategies presumes that such strategies exist. In Syria? Somalia? Myanmar? The uncertainty related to the concept of peace cannot be underestimated given the stakes. To what is the Nexus directed in terms of the high-level structural differentiation between peace, stabilisation and security? This paper finds greater potential in defining the Nexus through the lens of community-level conflict resolution. Further salient questions remain to be addressed, such as the relationship of the Triple Nexus to protection (see e.g., Lilly 2020) and how nexus-led programming might extend to geographic areas beyond government control (Slim 2017).

Important as they may be, these shortcomings do not justify calls for humanitarian action to be 'singled-out' to avoid the principles being 'harmed' and the response 'compromised' (see VOICE 2017). This absolutist thinking

on the principles sets up an unnecessary collision with the HDP Nexus. On one hand, people do not want endless handouts, donors do not want to pay year after year for band-aids, and the failure to address the root causes of conflict leads to more conflict. On the other hand, and in the words of an EU spokesman, the humanitarian principles are 'non-negotiable' (Redvers 2019).

Using non-negotiable principles as a 'get-out-of-the-Nexus-free card' actually replicates the problem it seeks to avoid, namely by instrumentalising the principles in order to engage in politics, the defence of a non-existent ideological and structural purity of the sector. This paper argues that the relationship should be more symbiotic than confrontational. The HDP Nexus heightens the need for humanitarian principles to guide new institutional 'degrees of Nexus' and, most importantly, emergent Nexus-thinking is needed to expand how humanitarians conceptualise and operationalise their principles.

4. Humanitarians have overstated the challenge posed by the principles

Notwithstanding the inherent and significant tension between the humanitarian principles and potential ways in which the Triple Nexus might be implemented, the sector's objections often resemble an argument in defence of sectoral turf, a resistance to change rather than an analysis of how to move forward. Even judged by current thinking on the humanitarian principles, the arguments often rely upon overstretched claims as to the nature of humanitarian action and the nature of the principles.

On the nature of humanitarian action

The rejection of the Nexus often rests on the mythological belief that a number of factors combine to deliver humanitarians above politics: its ideal of neutrality (not taking sides in a conflict) and independence (autonomy), its state-avoiding methodologies, its mantra that aid is exclusively based on the needs of people, and the virtuous intentions of its practitioners. This claim goes further than simply avoiding the perception of being partisan amid political controversy. Humanitarians have 'portrayed themselves not only as above politics, but as resolutely antithetical to politics; as anti-political.' (Fiori 2013: 8). In contradistinction, humanitarians see politics as baked into development, empowerment, and peacebuilding projects, to be kept distant on moral, operational and principled grounds (see Brown and Donini 2014).

The sector's ideological blockage contains the claim that because the principles prohibit the intention of political partisanship, humanitarians must therefore recoil from the sectoral intermingling proposed by the Nexus.[6]

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6 It also includes a dose of hypocrisy given the marked fluidity of the sector's actual investment in and commitment to upholding a principled approach (see Kittaneh et al. 2018; HERE-Geneva 2015; Macrae 2019).

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The way forward involves sidestepping this false political-apolitical binary altogether. The objective is access, not the illusion of political purity. In many contexts, safeguarding high levels of trust among people and various (armed) parties to the conflict will be critical to obtaining and maintaining access. As they always have, such efforts will require useful programming, skilled personnel, well-connected intermediaries, and no shortage of negotiation that includes compromise on the principles.

On the nature of the principles

Designed to empower and guide, the principles were never meant to function as exclusions or barriers, and yet they have been instrumentalised by the (Western-dominated) humanitarian sector as a gatekeeper to humanitarianism itself, a 'condition for partnership' (Fiori 2013: 9). This leads to the dissonance of a firewalled sector confronting the 'open plan' logic of the Nexus. Rather, the principles are meant to function as ideals, as 'lighthouses' to guide humanitarian decision-making, not as regulations (HERE-Geneva 2015; Labbé and Daudin 2015).

There is no state of being impartial, neutral or independent, only degrees of alignment with the ideal. Their meaning in a given context is to be defined through praxis and subject to deliberate compromise – and indeed compromise is the rule (HERE-Geneva 2015; Labbé and Daudin 2015). This is not to suggest either complete relativity or 'anything goes.' But when the Triple Nexus poses a significant challenge to the principles it calls for negotiation and ingenuity, not dogma. Or, as Jennifer Rubenstein phrases it, the responsibility of humanitarians is not to 'avoid all moral compromise' but to deliberate which moral compromises it should 'grudgingly accept' (Rubenstein 2015: 5). As discussed below, the HDP Nexus and the humanitarian principles both push in the direction of having to confront rather than evade this deliberation, and to do so on an ideological level, not simply across donor-driven linkages.

Crucially, the paramount principled concerns related to the Nexus revolve around neutrality and independence, given the potential jeopardy to access caused by association with political or military agendas/actors (Macrae 2019; CIC 2019; Tronc et al. 2019). It therefore bears noting that while humanity and impartiality are substantive principles that hold an inherent ethical purpose, neutrality and independence 'have no intrinsic moral value' (Labbé and Daudin 2015: 187). Their pragmatic role is to safeguard the access necessary for the realisation of humanity and impartiality. Again, this suggests nuance: 'Far from being rigid and dogmatic, … [neutrality and independence] can bend to fit the context.' (Labbé and Daudin 2015: 188).

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Another false premise lies in the humanitarian claim that development work requires partnership with the state while the humanitarian principles require a 'state-avoiding' approach. Both characterisations are false, and nothing in the humanitarian principles suggests that avoiding the state is required for their fulfilment. The need is for humanitarians to replace this ideology with a practice that is able to overcome what Paul Harvey (2013) calls the 'trust deficit' by engaging with states on a principled basis, rather than avoiding states on the basis of misapplied principles. The ICRC describes such a compromise thusly: 'focusing for instance on the reconstruction and rehabilitation of particular areas that are strategically important for the authorities' efforts to consolidate peace – while continuing to assess the population's needs objectively and carry out its programmes independently.' (Labbé and Daudin 2015: 204). In protracted conflict situations, the ICRC responded to this challenge with its concept of 'development holds' (ICRC 2016), an example of how development thinking should influence humanitarian decision-making. As to development, the primary thrust of development work has shifted over time to the strengthening of state macro-economic institutions and performance, but this focus is more artefact than inherent to development itself. Both community development and local empowerment nonetheless remain active, and these approaches are more integral and conducive to a bottom-up vision of the HDP Nexus.

The Nexus can help create the channels and intersectoral trust necessary to broaden out from a sectoral mindset. Various studies offer examples of the humanitarian sector engaging across the other two sectors at a local level, working to achieve collective outcomes, or finding technical synergies between programmes. For example: 'A Nexus approach gives many options for different strategies that we can take towards engaging with or avoiding state actors or parties to a conflict.' (Kittaneh et al. 2018: 19). In other circumstances such options might not exist. Structural Nexus programme linkages should never become mandatory. Nexus-inspired programme thinking, however, should.

5. A different vision for the HDP Nexus and its relationship to the principles

In contexts like Syria, South Sudan and Nigeria the HDP Nexus aims to connect three sectors that are already connected in both theory and geography. But is the HDP Nexus 'operationally feasible' (Slim 2017) in terms of joined or aligned operations? To navigate that logjam, approaching the HDP Nexus requires a shift from structures to the way the people in the three sectors think. 'The most fundamental challenge to operationalising 'LRRD' remains reconciling the fundamentally different institutional cultures, assumptions, values, structures and ways of working that characterise the "humanitarian" and the "development" "communities".' (Mosel and Levine 2014: 6-7).

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The top-down Nexus framework produces a focus on structural solutions, so for example recommendations to upgrade multi-year operational planning or to develop the capacity to leverage government-owned fundraising frameworks (see Steets et al. 2019). It will produce new intervention models, such as multi-sectoral consortia and shock-resilient development programming. These changes offer opportunities to improve individual and collective performance. Ultimately, though, this interpretation of the Nexus functionally relies upon the existing paternalistic and procedure-ridden system, and it produces interagency-centric approaches in the name of people-centric objectives. To imagine alternatives requires the cultivation of Nexus-thinking. Without attempting a formal definition, Nexus-thinking refers to a future culture and ideology where the mindset within the three sectors is sufficiently cross-pollinated that the differences become technical, not normative and not hierarchical, where Joanna Macrae (2019: 29) can no longer incisively conclude that 'the humanitarian and development communities continue to largely talk past each other when it comes to principles.'

The first step is a proper diagnosis of the problem. The HDP Nexus responds to the lack of linkage between the silos of H,D and P. Fundamentally this approach treats symptoms rather than dysfunctions. The problem is not insufficient connection between three silos. The problem is the silo, and its power to shape thinking and constrain imagination. The Triple Nexus effectively reinforces the three square pegs of cloistered international intervention systems being hammered into the round wicked whole of muddled, multi-dimensional societal crisis and human need.

Across humanitarian action, much of the recent energy and drive for change emerges from the people, communities and local NGOs living and working in so-called humanitarian contexts. Especially in protracted crisis or in the stasis of a permanent refugee camp, these people spend their lives bearing witness to the truth in former UNHCR High Commissioner Sadako Ogata's pronouncement that 'there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems'. A major source of the momentum behind the 'localisation agenda', participation revolution and parts of the Grand Bargain thus came from an expanding bottom-up complaint that the aid system was failing to meet the expressed needs of people. For example, as the consultation process for the WHS revealed, when people in protracted crisis rated their needs, the most common response was 'unemployment' (identified by roughly 35%) and 'poverty/destitution' was in second place (26%) (WHS Secretariat 2015: 55).

The poor responsiveness to needs is a direct consequence of the humanitarian sector's 'principled' model of addressing 'immediate' or 'life-saving' needs while ignoring or displacing in perpetuity the long-term and explicit needs and aspirations of people for livelihoods, development, and peace; all reinforced by the sector's enduring aversion to the meaningful operationalisation of the principles.

The problem is not insufficient connection between three silos. The problem is the silo.

Rethinking the way humanitarians understand the principles and their role fits precisely into this fundamental challenge of thinking differently, and is necessary to overcome the current antagonistic or even antithetical interplay with the Triple Nexus. Here are two propositions for moving forward:

1. Explore how Nexus-thinking is necessary to improve humanitarian programming and respect for its principles. Seeing the principles in opposition to engaging operationally with the development and peace sectors misses an opportunity to enlarge (quite literally) the humanitarian field of vision (§ 6).

2. Capitalise on Nexus-thinking to help the humanitarian sector strengthen the value, interpretation and operationalisation of its principles (§ 7).

6. Beyond sectoral tunnel vision regarding the principles

The Nexus does not, as often argued, call for humanitarians to 'do development' or to 'do peace', yet this perception seems to be a major stumbling block for the sector. The Nexus should drive humanitarians (and the other sectors) to break through oversimplified sectoral silos of thinking in order to better understand both the needs of people and the inadvertent consequences of humanitarian programming. From within the perspective of the sector's dominant thinking it dismisses many of the former as beyond its remit, i.e., needs related to development and peace, and devalues, excuses, or fails to see the latter.

For example, by bringing in perspectives from development and peace sectors, Nexus-thinking can hasten the movement beyond unjustified state-avoiding approaches, as the principles leave ample space for humanitarians to think about how they might support local/state institutions, at the same time helping to ensure a focus on the most vulnerable (see Macrae 2019).

As Hugo Slim (2017) has written with regard to IHL, context should sometimes blur the distinctions between sectors:

IHL also recognises that the 'reverberating effects' of long armed conflicts create systemic degradation over increase people's vulnerability. [...]. When dealing with this cumulative impact of protracted conflict, IHL might expect humanitarian action to become more deeply engaged in war-torn societies, in a way that some may stereotype as 'developmental' but which is humanitarian in such a context in support of basic needs. This is especially true if there is an absence of development actors.

The Nexus does not [...] call for humanitarians to 'do development' or to 'do peace'.

A second important contribution of Nexus-thinking is that it can improve how humanitarians see and gauge their impact, strengthening the decisions of project benefit vs. harm that underpin impartiality, ensuring that projects effectively address the urgent needs. In more familiar terms, Nexus-thinking enhances the capacity of aid agencies to 'Do No Harm' (DNH), which is crucial to principled action.[7] In its original interpretation, related to conflict dynamics, DNH begins with the premise that 'aid is not neutral', and DNH typically helps ensure that humanitarian programmes do not contribute directly to conflict (e.g., aid captured by warring parties).[8] With regard to Nexus-thinking, and away from its institutional attention to high-level political diplomacy and peacekeeping missions, the engagement with community-level conflict resolution should be emphasised, bringing a more sophisticated level of programmatic sensitivity to conflict dynamics and local capacities for peace. Again, the question facing humanitarians is not how to engage directly in political or even security-led processes, but how to complement or avoid undermining them. That requires a fundamentally different and difficult engagement, not knee-jerk rejection. As Oxfam advises, humanitarian and development work require 'deliberate and consistent integration of conflict sensitivity and enhancing local capacities for peace.' (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019: 40). A number of examples illustrate how Nexus-thinking relates to peace:

- ICRC provides an example of broad Nexus-thinking (though predating the current Nexus initiative). With regard to peace, the ICRC's humanitarian operations on both sides of a border involve 'humanitarian dialogue and reciprocity that build cross-conflict contact, trust and confidence between warring parties.' (Slim 2017). Further, as former ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga explained, humanitarian action 'can assume a positive and even politically useful role in the pursuit of reconciliation and reconstruction' (Fast 2015: 130, citation omitted).

- Humanitarian aid may also undermine stability and the principle of humanity by harming the very community structures, social contracts, and civic spaces that form the building blocks of a durable peace. Nexus-thinking 'sees' this. What happens, for example, when humanitarian aid is delivered based on impartiality, which posits the individual or household as the fundamental building block of aid distribution, in a society where the community remains the fundamental building block? Mercy Corps research shows how humanitarian action can thus undermine the crucial community resource of social capital (Humphrey et al. 2019).

7 In literal terms, 'Do No Harm' is a paralytic ideal, and more accurately should be thought of as 'do as little harm as possible'.

8 Global Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub, https://conflictsensitivity.org/conflict-sensitivity/ do-no-harm-local-capacities-for-peace-project/ accessed 24 April 2020. One note that seems obvious – it is far easier for warring parties to capture humanitarian aid than development aid.

- Nexus-thinking can also help humanitarians recognise their value. The perceived and operational neutrality of humanitarian organisations working in areas of conflict can be a useful advantage, a level of community connection and built trust that few actors possess.

- Beyond the scope of this paper, Nexus-thinking should push humanitarian protection actors to engage more fully with the longstanding tension between their efforts (e.g., rights-based advocacy efforts aiming to end impunity and support justice) and peace efforts to bring parties together (see GPC 2018). At the very least, it will force the two sides to work on clarifying the considerable lack of conceptual clarity in their work (see Fast 2018).

It should be clear that none of the points above fully refute humanitarian concerns over the Nexus, and in particular over the prospect of inter-sectoral operations in a conflict context, nor do they aim to do so. The aim is to refute objections, based on the principles, that assert a fixed humanitarian identity in opposition to the Triple Nexus. These objections show positions, not principles, at work.

A particular advantage of the application of Nexus-thinking to humanitarian action lies in changing the temporal dimension of the analysis – seeing beyond the short-term operational lens to its long-term consequences, especially in situations such as protracted crisis where humanitarian mode is sustained for years. Extensive research by the Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) as part of their highly regarded Listening Project showed that people felt positively about the assistance they received in the short-term, and yet when their perspective shifted to the long-term and wider society, the negative aspects, like dependency, outweighed the positive (Anderson et al. 2012). Humanitarians need to similarly shift their gaze and open their ears. While grateful for immediate assistance, people seek 'significant positive and lasting change' and name three specific areas where international aid should focus: economic betterment, improved political and security condition, and a sense of solidarity, colleagueship and support (Anderson et al. 2012).[9]

In examining new (institutional) ways of working, the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) notes that the UN's 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for the Central African Republic (CAR) explains that the humanitarian system has been called upon 'to replace the state in order to ensure access to essential services.' (Zamore 2019: 48). Such an assessment is not unproblematic: a state cannot be replaced and substitution as a mode of humanitarian action is an equally inaccurate term. That is important because humanitarian action is anything but state-avoiding or state-neutral, it is state-playing and state-displacing. Humanitarians are engaged for prolonged periods in highly political forms of governance, but only as 'second-best' because they cannot replicate the full range of state governance (see Rubenstein 2015).

9 The first two reinforce the point above (§ 5) on how people perceive their needs.

Nexus-thinking enhances the capacity of aid agencies to 'Do No Harm'.

Humanitarians need to similarly shift their gaze and open their ears.

Nor do humanitarian agencies possess either the legal authority or democratic legitimacy of a state, and the question of NGO legitimacy is further complicated by issues related to accountability. These sorts of issues manifest as minor weaknesses in a short-term analysis, but long-term analysis shifts the calculation to include the more substantial whole-of-society impact.

In Oxfam for example, 'the central role of development aid is to support the citizen-state compact.' (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019: 7). Over time, the aforementioned programming in CAR can be seen to erode or impede the development of this citizen-state social contract. It slows the establishment of trust between citizens and the state (and vice versa), disempowers local initiatives, fosters aid dependency, and/or impedes the expansion of civil society into the spaces now occupied by humanitarians. All of these harms may seem justifiable through a short-term or emergency frame of reference but become increasingly problematic as years or decades pass. Nexus-thinking thus helps humanitarians escape from siloed thinking, its false conceptualisation of its relationship to both people and the state, and shallow DNH calculations.[10] This allows humanitarians not only to extend the temporal dimension of their perspective but also enlarges their field of vision.

Furthermore, this enlarged field of vision raises the visibility and weight, for example, of the hundreds of small calculations related to the sustainability of the programming after an agency's departure (e.g., use of high-tech medical equipment vs. less effective equipment that local teams will be able to manage). In the end, as complex and sophisticated as the delivery of humanitarian action may be, the calculus within its home silo remains oversimplified, with consequences to humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and, more generally, to DNH aspirations. This failure is not one of ignoring the harm. Rather it stems primarily from the inability to perceive the harm in the first place. To progress, the first step involves removing the barriers to working and thinking in multi-disciplinary fashion within multi-disciplinary teams, such as the way the humanitarian principles have been interpreted to block such engagement. Easier said than done.

7. Revaluing the humanitarian principles

The second way to begin thinking more productively about how the principles relate to the Nexus involves using Nexus-thinking to comprehend the principles differently. The actual definition of the principles is not in question, but rather their interpretation or operationalisation. These may appear fixed but evolve with shifts in praxis and interpretation, such as how rights-based humanitarian approaches changed the understanding of neutrality, or in

10 The use of DNH framework has expanded beyond the earlier, narrower focus on the humanitarian impact on conflict (Bonis Charancle and Lucchi 2018).

the way the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provoked new discussion over the meaning and implementation of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief (Hilhorst 2005).

Local organisations often work holistically across the full HDP range of needs, and so are rarely exclusively humanitarian. This tendency is currently judged in the sector as a liability, as a disqualifier from the label of humanitarian. For example, agencies and donors insist that local partners contractually obligate themselves to comply with (the sector's interpretation of) the humanitarian principles. The necessity of being 'principled' and humanitarian is linked to arguments opposing localisation on grounds that local organisations cannot be neutral, independent or impartial in conflict crises because they are inherently part of the conflict dynamics (see Schenkenberg 2016). This instrumentalisation of the principles functions as a straitjacket on a Nexus-thinking approach[11], one that would see such pluralist local organisations as better responding to the needs of the people and therefore a model to be studied if not emulated. At the very least, a focus on the Nexus should challenge the humanitarian sector's obsession with 'capacity building' that seems designed to help local NGOs mimic the self-centred sectoral silos of the Global North.

Understanding the HDP Nexus as comprising a new way of thinking, leading to a new mindset, returns humanitarians to the bottom-up call for an aid system that responds more effectively to the needs and directives of people and communities in crisis. The principles themselves should orient humanitarian engagement in this direction, especially impartiality and humanity. Impartiality, for example, instructs that aid should respond to the most urgent needs of the people. A revaluation of the principle might include seeing urgency not simply as a matter of immediacy, but also in terms of depth. Humanity and the protection of human dignity should push actors in the direction of a humanitarian action that finds ways to involve itself, on its terms, in development and peace because this is the only way for humanitarians to address human suffering. Where is this push from the principles?

A general weakness in the effectiveness of the humanitarian principles stems from the substantial incompleteness in the operationalisation of the meaning of the principles (HERE-Geneva 2015; Schenkenberg 2015). Given its role as the sole purpose of humanitarian action, this paper proposes that operationalising humanity is an essential path to ensuring the humanitarian rather than paternal character of aid. Put simply, dead-central to humanity is the concept of dignity, and firmly lodged in human dignity is the need for development and peace.

11 As well, this blocks the development of an indigenous humanitarian response in non-Western communities.

All of these harms may seem justifiable through a short-term or emergency frame of reference but become increasingly problematic as years or decades pass.

Central to humanity is the concept of dignity and firmly lodged in human dignity is the need for development and peace.

From Nexus-thinking emerges a recognition: neither principles nor the humanitarian imperative should so easily elbow aside human dignity. Rather, in humanity the three sectors can find common ground in the concept of dignity. Recent research from HERE-Geneva (2020) confirms the degree to which humanitarian organisations diverge in how they interpret the overarching goal of humanitarian action, and this divergence also shapes the degree to which they will interact with development actors and the state. The root of this divergence lies in differing interpretations of humanity – 'two broadly different takes on the concept of life-saving', one based on physiological existence and the other more expansively set in the concept of dignity (Montemurro and Wendt 2020).[12]

From relief to humanitarian action - humanity as a driver of change

The ICRC defines the purpose of humanity: to 'protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.' (ICRC 1996). The definition includes the call to 'prevent and alleviate human suffering.' The force of that definition collides with some of the more absolutist objections to the HDP Nexus: 'humanity implies that no service whatsoever for the benefit of a suffering human being is to be dismissed out of hand' (ICRC 1996).

The principle of humanity is comprised of two elements: humanity as the embodiment of all human beings, and compassion, as the sentiment to act humanely towards the suffering of fellow humans (see Pictet 1979; Fast 2015). Yet in the discussion of humanity the ICRC itself and the influential commentaries of Jean Pictet focus more on the philosophical meaning of humanity for ICRC's humanitarian interventions, and devote scant attention to amplifying the contents of dignity (and they focus on individuals, not people or communities). A more modern analysis is that the sector's broad assumption of its humanity 'means it is often lost as an operational or orienting principle.' (Fast 2015: 113).

Recent research by the ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group reveals a profound flaw in the way humanitarians see their work: the failure to grasp that humanitarian aid, even respectfully-delivered and urgently-needed aid, simultaneously erodes people's sense of dignity by 'reinforcing people's feelings that they are not self-reliant.' (Mosel and Holloway 2019: 18; see also Anderson 2012). The study recommends that '[m]ore recognition needs to be given to

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12 For a related human rights perspective that includes an affirmation that life includes an entitlement to 'enjoy a life with dignity', see 'General comment No. 36 (2018) on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life'. https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e5e75e04.html (accessed 21 April 2020).

the tension between aid and dignity, and efforts made to make people feel that, wherever possible, they have control over their lives and their future.' (Mosel and Holloway 2019: 18). Perhaps, through the lens of humanity, humanitarian aid is not something to celebrate but a least worth thing to be struggled with.

In this critical view, humanity incorporates the dignity of not being reduced to one's biological or basic needs; to victimhood without agency and in need of being saved by the outsider (see e.g., HERE-Geneva 2015). A stereotype from which the humanitarian sector has done too little to shake free, and notably one where the positions of development workers or peace activists might provide crucial insights and critical impetus for change. Larissa Fast proposes that the operationalisation of the principle of humanity can be achieved through three 'transformative practices' and 'everyday actions' (2015: pp 124ff).

These points are emblematic of bottom-up Nexus-thinking:

1. Affirming local context and capacity, which requires that a humanitarian response 'affirms' a 'particular' social identity, culture and context at the local level. This steers humanitarian action away from the hierarchical or paternalistic devaluing of local knowledge.

2. Adopting vertical and horizontal accountability, which would include 'downward accountability' to those affected by crisis. Fast highlights the link of this accountability to the human right of people to impart information to organisations such as NGOs whose programmes affect them.

3. Valuing proximity and presence, again as a measure to counter the tendency of aid to reduce people in crisis to their essentialist identities as victims, patients or migrants, and instead engage with them as individual human beings (Fast 2015).

Humanity as a principle cannot be assumed based on an agency's label. Even in its institutional incarnation, the Nexus has triggered calls for 'mechanisms that put people at the centre of a nexus approach in an inclusive manner.' (Thomas 2019: 25, referring to OECD-DAC recommendations). Nexus-thinking goes further, advancing an intermingling of ideas, attitudes and, for lack of a better term, people that can provoke change. Nexus-thinking demands an ethical commitment to principles and hence the operationalisation of humanity within humanitarian action. As a prime example, while some humanitarians argue for a principled rejection of the Nexus with the 'political' enterprise of development, the principle of humanity calls for engagement and negotiation because it contains people's human right to development [3]and the full dignity of life.

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13 Declaration of the Right to Development, Adopted by General Assembly resolution 41/128 of 4 December 1986. https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/righttodevelopment.aspx (accessed 24 April 2020).

In humanity the three sectors can find common ground in the concept of dignity.

Humanity incorporates the dignity of not being reduced to one's biological or basic needs.

This neither prescribes an answer nor resolves the dilemma, but it pushes humanitarians to respond to people at a 'structural level to enable their immediate survival' and their living in dignity (see ICRC 2016). More importantly, it confronts humanitarians with a reality that does not support the 'solution' of exceptionalism.

Conclusion: The humanitarian principles as a driver of change, not guardian against it.

This paper rejects the position that the humanitarian principles function primarily as a barrier to engagement with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (aka Triple Nexus). It proposes a twinned path forward. First, rooting Nexus-thinking in people and a bottom-up (de-siloed) response to their needs. Second, recognising the humanitarian commitment to the principle of humanity as obligating humanitarians to operationally respect the dignity and agency of people in crisis. In conclusion, the five core arguments of the paper are:

1. The core humanitarian principles form ideals to guide humanitarian action and not a firewall against the HDP Nexus.

Concerns for humanitarian action being jeopardised by a (perceived) subordination to the political agendas of development and peacebuilding must be framed within a deliberation, one that understands the principles as offering guidance in reaching compromise, not regulations that forbid engagement.

2. The prevailing view frames the HDP Nexus as a top-down set of institutional and structural reforms, coupled with new mechanisms and synergies at a technical level. This view is too often blind to the Nexus as a bottom-up call for thinking differently.

While the Nexus can be credited with some beneficial intersectoral structural reforms and new systemic mechanisms, a level of more fundamental change is required to address the culture, ideology and mindset that determine much of how humanitarian action defines its exceptionalist role. In particular, the Nexus can be seen as a way of listening to the ever-louder chorus of people in crisis, especially in protracted crisis, who protest against an aid system that focuses too heavily on humanitarian needs and response. Here, one can imagine pragmatic measures to give greater precedence to an intermingling of ideas by intermingling people, to overcome talking past each other. For example: reorganising agencies and teams around contexts, not professional qualifications or sectors; placing development and peace experts within humanitarian operations to act as quality control; creating planning processes that include analysis of long-term consequences; or investing in research to understand long-term effects.

3. The principles require, and Nexus-thinking facilitates decision-making that extends beyond 'humanitarian' consequences of humanitarian programming.

The Triple Nexus allows humanitarians to leverage or operationalise the distinction between (a) understanding how 'respect for the principles has a cost for the ICRC as it limits the organization's ability to develop programmes aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict' (Labbé and Daudin 2015: 205) and (b) committing the organisation, in fulfilment of those same principles, to anticipate, comprehend and mitigate any contribution to the root causes of poverty and conflict or the undermining of work to address them. In other words, granted that in some contexts humanitarian actors should not visibly align with policies 'to correct political, social and economic injustices' (Castellarnau and Stoianova 2018), the humanitarian principles direct that the (unintended) undermining of such policies should be minimised, and some sort of compromised engagement sought. This posits Nexus-thinking as driving the enlargement and improvement of 'Do No Harm' calculations.

Access may not guarantee being able to save lives, but the lack of it surely condemns many to suffer. Perceptions of impartiality, neutrality, and independence do matter. But the HDP Nexus and a revalued principle of humanity should spark humanitarians to a concomitant recognition, that if the cost of safeguarding humanitarian access inhibits development and peacebuilding it also condemns many to suffer. People have a human right to development and peace. Receiving critical aid can immediately save lives and at the same time undermine dignity.

4. Both the principles and HDP Nexus challenge the protracted maintenance of an exclusively short-term approach (focus on immediate needs) amid protracted crisis.

The sector must listen to what the people it serves have been saying. Working year after year after year in a protracted crisis calls for a different orientation towards the ambitions and methodologies of development and peace. That humanitarians can work for twenty years in the same protracted crisis and not question their underlying assumptions and appropriateness is an indictment of a system inadequately concerned with its ethics and impact. 'By definition, the traditional idea of principled humanitarianism sits awkwardly alongside peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, social equality, economic development and climate change mitigation. And [... humanitarian action ...] cannot be so easily aligned with policies that are designed to correct political, social and economic injustices.' (Castellarnau and Stoianova 2018: 27). This situation marks a challenge, not a border. While principled humanitarianism may sit awkwardly with these related fields, it should not intervene for years if not decades without addressing them, in particular where humanitarians may be the sole sector present. This calls for discussion and compromise, not the raising of sectoral drawbridges.

The Nexus can be seen as a way of listening to the ever-louder chorus of people in crisis, especially in protracted crisis, who protest against an aid system that focuses too heavily on humanitarian needs and response.

If the cost of safeguarding humanitarian access inhibits development and peacebuilding it also condemns many to suffer.

5. Humility, not hegemony: respect for the 'truths' and virtues of development and peace.

Numerous voices have called for an urgent dose of humility in the sector, and its absence mounts a particularly important barrier to engaging on less ideologically antagonistic grounds with the HDP Nexus. The humanitarian principles do not defend humanitarian exceptionalism, not even in their ideal form. Exceptionalism – including the exceptional insulation from the explicit needs and responses of people in crisis: development and peace – is not necessary to safeguard the principles. This humility can lead humanitarians to an explicit recognition of the ethical and principled trade-offs and human damage at the centre of humanitarian actions. Taking up the challenge of operationalising or revaluing the humanitarian purpose of humanity offers a common grounding for all three sectors in the concept of dignity. That is not simply an effective place for Nexus-thinking to start, it is the principled and ethical place to start, with people in communities rather than with sectors in silos.

6. This paper is designed to raise questions even when it is unable to provide sufficient answers. Nexus-thinking and the principle of humanity have the power to challenge the sector's engagement with people, from the small way in which a nurse takes the pulse of a patient to the big way in which a sector addresses poverty and peace. These are three sample challenges:

- Do the principle of humanity and the dignity of people require the development sector to work towards the empowerment of local communities in terms of their gaining control over one of the primary determinants of their lives, the humanitarian sector? In protracted crises, should development agencies set up dedicated programme streams to build people's ability to exercise agency and accountability over humanitarian agencies?

- How can the humanitarian sector transform itself from being centred on the people delivering aid to the people who are or should be receiving it? In other words, how can the sector's architecture – its organisations and operations – be based on the centrality of context and a whole-of-needs approach, replacing the architectural centrality of professional expertise and managerial process? This calls for a holistic architecture to replace the architecture of subdivision and separation.

- Do humanity and human dignity require much greater political freedom of funding streams to reach people in protracted crisis? An approach that does not so easily oppose people's right to development and peace against donor polices rooted in the politics of regime-shaming?

It is the principled and ethical place to start, with people in communities rather than with sectors in silos.

Can donors reject the position in which granting of development assistance is ideologically equated to the act of bestowing legitimacy upon the recipient regime, and approve much larger flows of development funding to protracted crises?

Final remarks

The issue at hand is neither institutional nor structural. It is existential. The substantive ethic of humanity can no longer coexist with a humanitarian sector that remains overly silo-scopic in its view of human needs and paternalistic in its view of humanity. Visualising this transformation can be borrowed from US-American political history, where the principle of democracy was for two centuries 'operationalised' as a degraded 'democracy', not a democracy at all as people understand it today given the disenfranchisement of women and racial minorities. The Civil Rights struggle of black US-Americans, then, was not only a struggle for equality, it was a struggle that gave US-Americans democracy, revaluing 'democracy' into democracy not by changing its definition or by substituting a new principle but by exposing its fatal failure (Hannah-Jones 2019). This is the power of revaluing principles. The humanitarian objective should be humanity. In the end, the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus is not anathema to principled humanitarian action, it holds the key to unlocking it; and, vitally, vice versa.

The substantive ethic of humanity can no longer coexist with a humanitarian sector that remains overly silo-scopic in its view of human needs and paternalistic in its view of humanity.

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IMPRESSUM

This paper is published as part of the CHA research project "The Triple Nexus in Practice". It reflects the views of the author.

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