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SWP Comment

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Interlinking Humanitarian Aid, Development Cooperation and Peacebuilding in Displacement Contexts

The Added Value of the HDP Nexus' Peace Component

Nadine Biehler, Barbara Kobler and Amrei Meier

Record numbers of violent conflicts are causing growing needs for humanitarian aid, especially in situations of forced displacement. Given the scarcity of resources, many actors seek to provide more effective, efficient and needs-based support. That is also the objective of the humanitarian, development and peace nexus (HDP nexus). The main added value of the HDP nexus in situations of forced displacement lies in its comprehensive perspective on peace, which extends beyond social cohesion and creates space for political solutions and conflict transformation. The latter is a precondition for durable solutions for forcibly displaced people. The German government can actively support this by disseminating and deepening nexus expertise and improving accountability to affected populations.

The numbers of forcibly displaced people have been increasing for years. In October 2023 there were 110 million, including 36.4 million refugees, 62.5 million internally displaced people and 6.1 million asylum-seekers, marking another record. New and continuing violent conflicts and massive human rights violations will continue to cause forced displacement, while many existing displacement situations have no solution in sight. Humanitarian and development needs are growing in step with the increasing prevalence and duration of situations of forced displacement. Although funding for humanitarian aid is at record levels, it still lags behind the rapidly grow-

ing needs. And cuts are expected in 2024, at least in Germany.

In humanitarian aid and development cooperation, improving efficiency has therefore long been regarded as a solution to provide better services despite dwindling resources. One strategy for achieving this is for the two areas (which long operated separately and with different rationales) to cooperate more closely and to coordinate their efforts from the beginning of a crisis.

The so-called humanitarian-development-peace nexus represents the latest initiative of that type. It was launched in 2016 after earlier attempts to interlink humanitarian aid and development cooperation failed to



produce the expected gains. The HDP nexus goes a step further than its predecessors, including peacebuilding as its third pillar (alongside humanitarian aid and development cooperation). This approach is supported by the German government and has been encouraged in particular by UN organisations, NGOs, and the members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee.

The HDP nexus seeks to generate synergy effects by improving coordination of the three named areas; ultimately humanitarian emergencies, lack of development and violent conflicts are mutually reinforcing. It is hoped that addressing the structural causes will reduce humanitarian need in the long term and avoid dependency on aid, as well as empowering affected populations to make independent decisions about their lives again. Peacebuilding efforts are intended to safeguard these achievements.

HDP nexus in situations of forced displacement

The multi-stakeholder HDP nexus approach is being implemented in twenty-five countries by UN organisations, NGOs, donor countries, national governments and civil society. Humanitarian, development and peace actors work together to achieve collective outcomes in, for example, Cameroon, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Forced displacement is relevant in many nexus countries, whether they are hosting refugees from other countries, experiencing internal or cross-border displacement because of their own violent conflicts, or seeing former refugees return.

The HDP nexus is highly relevant in all these contexts, because few forcibly displaced people benefit from one of the three so-called durable solutions – local integration, return or resettlement – and the global numbers continue to grow. Return is often the preferred solution both for forcibly displaced persons and for their host countries and regions; peace and security are crucial preconditions for return to be possible. With its additional focus on peace-

building, the HDP nexus therefore offers new opportunities, especially for situations of forced displacement – despite the considerable associated challenges. The approaches pursued to date fell short in this respect (quite apart from their lack of success).

The peace component in situations of forced displacement

In the peace dimension – the “P” pillar – a distinction is often made between “small” or “little p” and “big P”. “Small p” designates measures designed to build conflict prevention and management capacities as well as social cohesion and trust within a community. These activities tend to operate at the local level. In contrast, “big P” activities aim directly at achieving a political or military resolution of violent conflict. The latter include high level political dialogue, mediation and diplomacy, as well as instruments like peacekeeping missions and stabilisation operations. Both dimensions are important in displacement situations. “Big P” measures in particular, with their aspiration to political solutions and conflict transformation at national/regional level, offer great potential for urgently needed durable solutions, and thus represent a considerable innovation compared to earlier approaches.

“Small p” measures

The “small peace” already features in existing approaches that “only” link humanitarian aid and development cooperation. These include the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) implemented in countries neighbouring Syria and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in numerous countries in Africa, Asia and South America.

Social cohesion and local conflict management

Both 3RP and CRRF include initiatives to promote social cohesion and conflict sensitivity, for example to reduce tensions between local populations on the one hand

and refugees, internally displaced people and returnees on the other. Such tensions can arise where forcibly displaced persons or returnees significantly change the demographic composition or place pressure on social, economic, institutional and natural resources.

The minimum standard for conflict sensitive action is the “do no harm” principle. This acknowledges that no intervention, whether humanitarian, development-oriented or peace-driven, can ever be absolutely neutral: there are always intentional and unintentional effects on power relations. The point of the “do no harm” principle is to identify and avoid unintentional negative effects. To this end, organisations operating on the ground prepare conflict analyses during the planning process. Subsequently, continuous monitoring ensures that social tensions are detected early and that the programme design can be adjusted accordingly.

Today “do no harm” and conflict sensitivity are firmly established in development cooperation. Many humanitarian actors, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the European Commission for the EU’s humanitarian aid, and the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, also commit to the “do no harm” principle.

Beyond “do no harm” and conflict sensitivity, strengthening social cohesion can contribute indirectly to peace at the local level. Improving social cohesion enhances resilience to escalating tensions, helps reduce violence and supports reconciliation processes. Examples of such activities include joint training programmes for refugees and host communities.

Conflict management mechanisms such as mediation training, on the other hand, seek to contribute more directly to peaceful resolution of local conflicts, for example in the widespread land and ownership disputes between returning refugees and stayees.

“Small p” actors

Whereas many local and international humanitarian and development organisa-

tions seek to strengthen social cohesion through their work, concrete conflict management measures are usually implemented by specialised NGOs such as Swisspeace, Interpeace, International Alert and Search for Common Ground. The UN Peacebuilding Fund is specialised in conflict management and provides financing in this area. Civilian components of peacekeeping missions also engage in “small p” activities, including monitoring tensions between population groups and working to reduce them by organising dialogue forums with local conflict parties. Such an approach can facilitate the return of internally displaced people, as occurred in Ituri Province in the DRC. The UN political missions and OSCE field missions are also active in local conflict management, in particular with confidence-building measures.

Major development actors like the World Bank also play an important role in “small p” activities by making grants and loans conditional on conflict sensitivity and legislation focussed on durable solutions. For example financing through the International Development Association’s Window for Host Communities and Refugees requires the host country’s government to present a strategy containing concrete steps including political reforms seeking long-term solutions for both host communities and forcibly displaced people.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development’s transitional development assistance and its special initiative for refugees and host countries both encompass social cohesion. With its Civil Peace Service, the German government also has an instrument run by peace and development organisations that explicitly pursues violence prevention and peacebuilding in crisis regions. This is implemented by civilian experts operating at the local level.

“Big P” measures

In comparison to earlier approaches, which combined humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the special added value

of the HDP nexus for displacement situations (and durable solutions) lies in its innovation of including the “big Peace”, at least as a conceptual objective. New forms of cooperation are being put in place to realise this in practice.

In the concrete implementation of the HDP nexus at country level and in most approaches related to forced displacement, the “small p” has so far been the focus. While such measures are certainly important for reducing or avoiding local tensions, and do contribute to peaceful coexistence, they can only achieve small-scale and local improvements. They cannot achieve sustainable and durable solutions offering real perspectives and equal rights for forcibly displaced people and host societies because the solution of safe and dignified return – which is frequently preferred in the Global South too – presupposes peace and security.

“Big P” activities extend far beyond the local (or project) level. The deeper peacebuilding required at national/regional level lies outside the remit of humanitarian aid and is generally regarded as too complex or too political by development actors. The “big P” aspiration of the nexus creates – at least conceptually – the space to (potentially) fill this gap.

Practical implementation: cooperation with new actors

The nexus makes a significant practical contribution by bringing in additional peace actors and activities which are lacking in existing approaches that only involve humanitarian aid and development cooperation. The nexus thus offers the possibility of involving diplomatic corps and peace operations – with their objectives of supporting political peace processes and peaceful resolution of existing conflicts – alongside organisations specialising in local conflict prevention and conflict management (see above).

Peace operations

One elementary component of the UN’s purely civilian special political missions is the high level political dialogue (“good

offices”) of their special representatives, for example in Colombia. Even in UN peacekeeping missions with robust mandates, good offices augment military, civilian and police activities. The special representatives engage directly with heads of state and other key actors like opposition leaders, armed groups and traditional authorities to resolve existing conflicts and prevent new ones.

There is scope to make use of good offices in situations of forced displacement, as demonstrated by the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, which has been rolled out in fifteen pilot countries since 2022. The Action Agenda explicitly integrates high level political dialogue into the work of the UN Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. Additionally UN headquarters in New York encourages special representatives of UN political and peacekeeping missions in Action Agenda pilot countries to integrate solutions for internally displaced people in their high level political dialogues with governments. Return presupposes peace and security and necessitates peacebuilding and the involvement of internally displaced people themselves in peace processes. Because many countries affected by internal displacement are also countries of origin of refugees – like Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan for example – such peace efforts can also have positive effects for the return of refugees, always presupposing this is included in the negotiations.

Diplomacy

Diplomatic corps and donor forums also have an important role in building peace as a precondition for durable solutions. Joint statements by various donor countries for DR Congo for example condemned violence by armed actors against the civilian population and humanitarian actors and expressed their support for the government’s actions against these groups. Such statements find a wider audience if they are agreed with other stakeholders like UN organisations, development banks and civil society, and supported by concrete activities

such as high level political dialogue or funding for new projects.

Diplomatic corps, regional and international donor forums, and regional organisations like the African Union are especially important for getting all relevant actors round the same table in conflicts with a regional or international dimension. In 2022 the AU played a central role in ending the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia. Resolving conflicts of this type is often much more complex than dealing with purely internal conflicts. One specific challenge is that the mandates of relevant political and peacekeeping missions are generally restricted to a single country. The different mandates of relevant UN organisations and the geographical distance between actors also hinder information exchange and coordination of efforts. Regional forums and organisations and regional UN and EU special representatives could also create further added value by bringing together different actor groups and the three pillars of the nexus at the regional level. That would allow them to work in a coordinated fashion towards conflict resolution in a particular context, and thus also towards the possible return of refugees and internally displaced people.

Positive peace as the goal

The switch of perspective associated with the HDP nexus is also helpful for durable solutions. “Positive peace” (after Galtung) means more than the absence of political violence. Instead it emphasises the humanitarian and development needs of those affected, treating social justice as central. That also implies involving marginalised groups and those experiencing multiple discrimination – which frequently include women, internally displaced people, refugees and young people – in peace processes.

The thrust here is a peace that reduces the need for humanitarian aid and includes the expansion of development opportunities, and thus promises greater durability. This perspective orientated on the needs of those affected thus extends beyond stabili-

sation approaches, which prioritise the absence of political violence. Even if comprehensive, sustainable, positive peace often remains unachievable, it is nevertheless important for humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors to formulate it as a goal, so that they can align their activities or at least make a contribution.

Recommendations

Both support for national peace processes and local conflict management and social cohesion are highly relevant for forced displacement, both internal and cross-border. “Small p” elements like conflict sensitivity and supportive peace-promoting activities are vital in these politically sensitive and generally fragile situations. The same applies to “big P” aspects.

The comprehensive peacebuilding approach of the HDP nexus is crucial – albeit often hard to implement in practice – in displacement situations, especially where cross-border displacement is involved. (Positive) peace alleviates the causes of conflict (and thus forced displacement) and represents a step towards durable solutions for forcibly displaced people, whether at their place of origin, place of refuge or elsewhere.

To fully capitalise on the added value of the HDP nexus, there are a number of recommendations for policymakers.

Support the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement

Although the Special Adviser's mandate only runs for two years, the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement offers great potential and Germany should actively support this work. German embassies and relevant ministries should include peaceful conflict management and durable solutions for internally displaced people in their high level political dialogues. Wherever possible Germany should also push for (south-south) return of internally displaced people and refugees to be included in these processes. In addition, Germany should lobby for the search for durable solutions and other HDP

nexus-relevant objectives to be systematically integrated in the mandates of peace operations under the auspices of UN, EU, OSCE and other regional organisations.

When the Special Adviser's mandate ends in 2024, it would be in Germany's interest to assess what lessons can be drawn from the inclusion of high level political dialogue and cooperation with political and peacekeeping missions. Lessons learnt could then be used both for situations of forced displacement beyond the Action Agenda pilot countries, and for implementation of the HDP nexus in general.

Decentralise decision-making processes

To overcome institutional boundaries between departments and ministries (in both donor countries and partner countries) and between UN agencies, Germany should advocate for greater decentralisation, so that more decisions about nexus activities are made at regional, national and local level. That would mean increasing the staffing and funding of embassies and delegations on the ground and giving them greater decision-making powers. This aligns with the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator's so-called Flagship Initiative, which seeks a people-centred reform of humanitarian aid. The initiative seeks to expand the decision-making powers of humanitarian actors at national level and free them from strict global guidelines. The aim is to ensure that activities are better aligned with the actual needs of affected populations and their respective contexts.

For Germany, this means aligning the activities of development cooperation officers, humanitarian aid officers and stabilisation officers in the missions abroad more closely with those responsible for tackling forced displacement and migration and making the latter's tasks more development-oriented. Existing instruments for coordination between the German Federal Foreign Office and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development — such as the joint analysis and planning — should also be applied systematically and should encompass all available instru-

ments, including transitional development assistance and the special initiative for refugees and host countries.

In addition, implementation of nexus measures must be handled to an even greater extent by local organisations, as already provided for in the Grand Bargain for humanitarian aid and called for in the Flagship Initiative. Local organisations often concentrate primarily on needs and do not distinguish between humanitarian, development and peace issues, in contrast to many international organisations and donors. And not least, affected governments should be encouraged to assume a coordinating role.

Use "trilingual" experts

Germany and other donors should make greater use of experts with knowledge of all three pillars of the HDP nexus (or train personnel accordingly). This applies above all at the level of embassies and EU delegations and to a lesser extent also to the capitals of donor countries. Greater understanding of the methods, comparative advantages and deficits in other domains is a precondition for mutual understanding, deeper cooperation and improved inter-ministerial coordination.

The Nexus Academy, created as an initiative of the OECD and the UN and co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, represents an important step in this direction. It should be expanded to allow even more people to participate. In Germany, the Centre for International Peace Operations (ZIF) works on capacity-building and offers training on the HDP nexus for experts to be deployed to peace operations or on humanitarian missions. With a view to utilising all of these resources in an even more targeted manner, HDP nexus advisers working in situations of forced displacement should also be tasked with the responsibility of seeking durable solutions, and ideally located in the respective UN resident coordinator's office. It will also be easier for humanitarian and development actors to cooperate with civil components of peace

operations if staff are well informed about such missions and able to differentiate between their components.

Overcome disincentives

The taboo on openly addressing aid organisations' economic interests in the status quo and the factors that frequently disincentivise interlinking of the three pillars – both for donors and for implementing organisations – need to be overcome. One central mechanism for this could be accountability vis-à-vis – or evaluation of measures by – those affected. The German government should therefore ensure that existing monitoring instruments offer better opportunities for user feedback and that their inclusion in planning and evaluation is mandatory. To date that has been too rare and unsystematic. The incentive structure would change if feedback from recipients played a greater role than visibility and status. That would give an advantage to organisations that align their measures on actual needs and coordinate on this basis with other actors. Accountability is already a significant element in reform efforts such as the aforementioned Flagship Initiative.

(Regional or country-specific) geographical basket funding that includes all three pillars could also contribute to changing unfavourable incentive structures. Donors could also require implementing partners to cooperate more closely with actors from the other pillars (for example through the leverage offered by tendering), and reward this accordingly. Joint commissioning of organisations from different pillars also points in the right direction, as found in UN Joint Programmes; the SUN project commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (“Supporting the UNHCR in implementing the Global Compact on Refugees in the humanitarian aid, development and peace nexus”) and run jointly by the Deutsche

Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the UNHCR; and joint commissioning of NGOs by the German Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development through the nexus-chapeau approach. However, further expansion of the “big P” dimension of the peace pillar would be desirable in all these initiatives.

None of these measures alone will make a decisive difference. It will be important not simply to rely on the greater efficiency and effectiveness of the nexus approach changing the way actors work. It is also important to ensure that continuous monitoring and evaluation takes place. The decisive factor here must be tangible improvements for affected populations. Then there is a real opportunity for humanitarian, development and peace actors to jointly contribute to conflict resolution and to create perspectives for forcibly displaced populations.

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