

JOINING WHAT BELONGS TOGETHER?

The triple nexus and the struggle for policy synthesis

Lately, the nexus policy approach has resurfaced among global policy-makers seeking a convenient combination of humanitarian action, development and peace. Our author gives an account of the different nexus approaches and trends over the last few decades and shows where their restrictions are, seen from a humanitarian angle.

By Hugo Slim

Today, humanitarian policy is much taken up with an old Latin word which is to be found all over UN resolutions and policy documents. The word is “nexus”, and it means to bind together like strands in a rope, or a meeting point at which several things join up like a junction of different roads. Nexus policy is the new meta-policy in the socio-economic policy of the United Nations, several western governments and the many international organisations and humanitarian and development NGOs who take their money. A nexus strategy deliberately sets out to find common ground in three important institutional goals which have typically been separated into three different disciplines, professions and bureaucracies. These three policy goals are peace, development and humanitarian action, which when woven together embody the “triple nexus” that is the latest attempt to find effective policy synthesis and operational synergy in pursuit of these three global public goods.

THREE OVERLAPPING FIELDS OF GLOBAL POLICY

Since the creation of the UN and its revitalised international policy in 1945, these three fields of international action have been recognised as fundamentally important and closely linked areas of common purpose but also operationally distinct in their applied ethics and their professional expertise. At the risk of caricature,

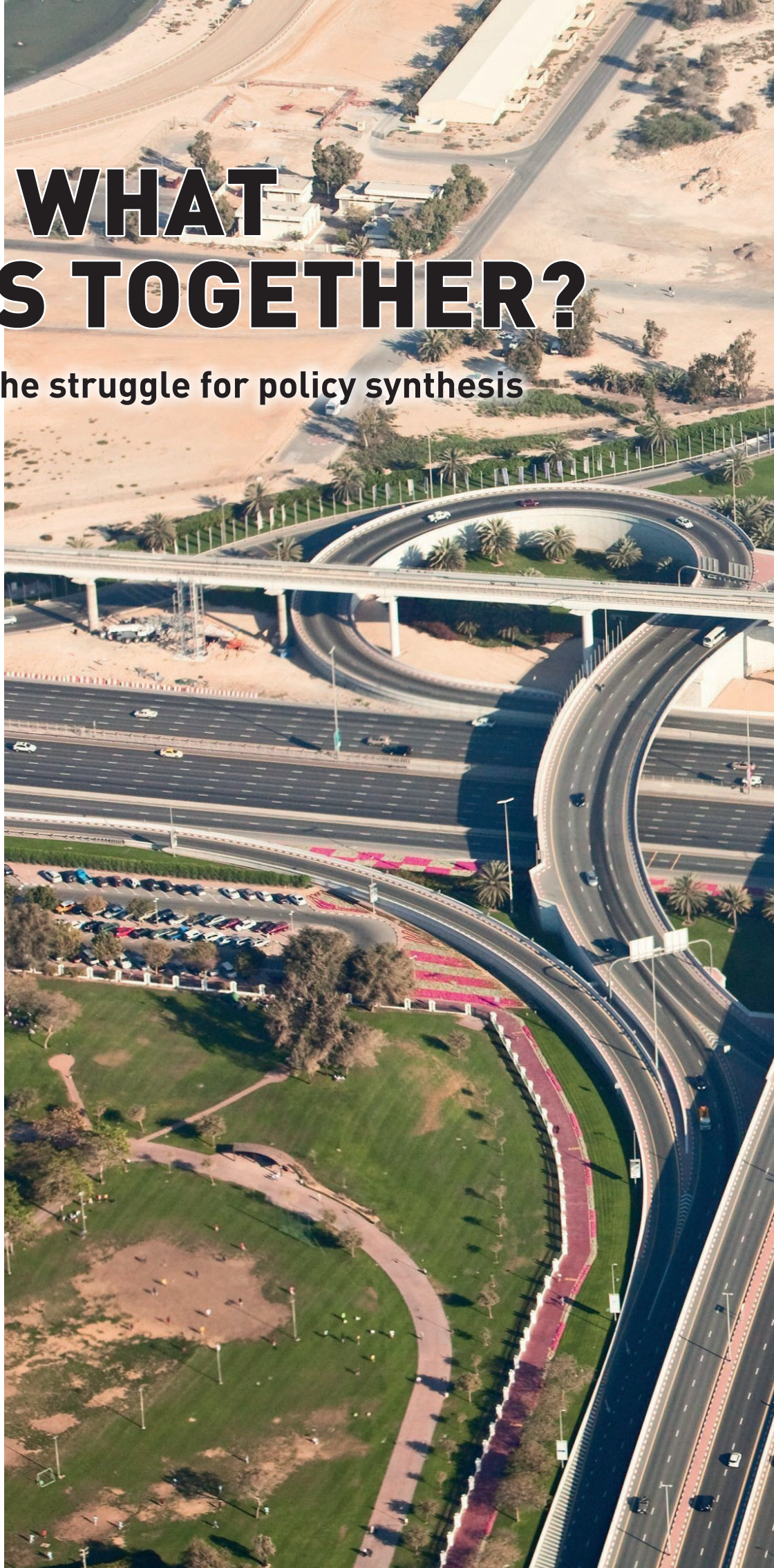




Photo: Thomas Eberly / Laif



The notion of a comprehensive approach was backed by western-leaning governments at the high point of liberal interventionism in the 1990s and 2000s. Italian soldiers during a patrol in Afghanistan.

Photo: Giulio Piscitelli/contrasto/laif



The Village Chief of Likraker in the Tumbuctu Region of Mali inspecting the reconstructed drinking-water plant. The rehabilitation work benefits 1,200 inhabitants and their livestock herds.

Photo: ICRC

development is the domain of economists and banks determined to work with governments to reduce poverty and form prosperous states; peace is the preserve of politicians and mediators who resolve conflict within or between states and generate cross-party consensus to build peaceful political arrangements, and humanitarian action is the urgent pursuit of medics, barefoot economists and social workers to ease human suffering and restore basic living conditions for especially vulnerable people after disasters and during the horrors of armed conflict.

The overlap is clear. Humanitarians and development teams are both typically concerned with sustaining and improving clinics, schools, agricultural production and urban livelihoods. And every peace scientist will tell you, in the words of Martin Luther King, that peace is not just the absence of war but the presence of justice, so that peace projects also build on people's needs for public goods like health, prosperity and fair government to make peace real. As Pope Paul VI observed back in 1967 at the high water mark of progressive development theory: "development is peace".

Disaster experts and humanitarian workers in this triangle of global ambition have also always worried about the risks of repeatedly giving people hand-outs and not addressing the famous "root causes" of disasters and conflicts. This led economist Ernst Schumacher to re-emphasise Ghandi's famous observation that "if you give a person a fish you feed them

for a day, but if you give them a fishing rod you feed them for a lifetime". In other words, humanitarian action is best done with a little community development theory mixed in, and, who knows, this might even make societies more peaceful too if they are all happily fishing, eating and enjoying a sustainable livelihood. This would be the triple win so desired by nexus theorists: humanitarian aid developmentally applied which builds up peace.

If only this were so easy, then we at the International Committee of the Red Cross could perhaps change our Latin motto from *inter arma caritas* ('amidst arms, charity') to *inter arma nexus*! However, like many things that sound so reasonable in theory, the nexus is a little more difficult in practice, and today's new nexus policy is not the first time that global policy-makers have tried to find an easy blending between the pursuit of humanitarian action, development and peace – a delicious policy fondue into which all agencies can dip their various projects.

A HISTORY OF ATTEMPTED SYNTHESIS

Nexus policy is not a sudden revolution in global policy but simply the latest variant in the continuing effort to synthesise these three different strands of policy and practice. Several synthesising efforts in recent history have struggled to realise the obvious insight that peace, development and humanitarian action have a

lot in common. In the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America, and under the influence of Marxist theory, for example, many NGOs merged human rights, humanitarian action, community development and peace work into a single movement of "solidarity" with communities struggling against right-wing dictatorships. A more technocratic approach developed in the 1980s and 1990s that aimed to merge peace, development and humanitarian action alongside a now dominant neoliberalism. This required humanitarians to do "developmental relief" that addressed people's deep seated vulnerabilities as well as their emergency needs. On their side, development agencies were asked to engage in "relief-informed development" so that their development work always built in disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness. These approaches were taken up in UN and government policies as "linking relief, rehabilitation and development" (LRRD), or later, as working very deliberately along the "relief-development continuum" in a so-called continuum policy.

Much of this policy-making was informed by important work on disaster management by US scholar-practitioners like Fred Cuny, Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow in the 1980s, which noted how people would always suffer terribly from natural hazards and famine if their underlying vulnerabilities were not reduced and their capacities to withstand shocks significantly increased. This required a mix of relief and development work and reframed disaster management as deeply developmental and



Humanitarian action has no vested interest in any particular political outcome to a conflict. An X-ray of a patient's head in Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Photo: ICRC/Will Carter

ICRC's mandate is to reach out to all suffering individuals who are in need because of armed conflict and disaster, to "everyone, everywhere" who is in need. A university clinic in South Sudan.

Photo: ICRC/Erika Tovar

intricately involved with government policy and investments in preparedness and prevention activities. Mary Anderson then took this linking work further in the 1990s by joining up with peace and showing how humanitarian and development work could either boost pro-peace processes or heighten conflict tensions. This then made it an essential policy for all humanitarian action and development work to adopt "conflict sensitive programming" so that it "did no harm" by increasing conflict and violence, but instead helped to develop pro-peace resources in affected communities.

At the high point of liberal interventionism and post-conflict state formation in, for example, Afghanistan, Liberia, DRC and Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s, western-leaning governments backed a "comprehensive approach" in their attempts at liberal state-building which required the peace-building, development and humanitarian parts of a UN country operation to work together in an "integrated" way that shared objectives to "stabilise" a country.

NEXUS POLICY AND ITS CONTINUING TENSIONS

The important insight of today's nexus policy and its "triple nexus" focus remains the same as its predecessors: that these three different goals and their distinct professions and practices do indeed share important common objectives and are often engaged in similar activities to improve health and other basic services, to

limit violence and to improve the economy, governance and the rule of law.

Nexus policy was formalised to some degree at the multi-stakeholder World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, Turkey, in May 2016. A majority view at the WHS argued that today's protracted conflicts – in which people endure suffering, impoverishment and the collapse of basic services for decades – especially require more joined-up co-operation between humanitarian action, development and peace-building in a "New Way of Working" adopted by UN heads of agencies. This was followed in 2018 by the new UN Secretary General's elaboration of a new policy goal for "sustainable peace" which blended the ultimate objectives of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with an explicit concern for peace-building.

But this professional consensus is not absolute. At the same time as the overlaps between these three global projects are simple and obvious they are also felt to be complicated. Each profession perceives itself to be ethically and operationally distinct, so they are happy to say that they are similar to one another but also want to say that they are different. The Developmentalist may respect the Peacebuilder and the Humanitarian but sees them as small niche players because, of course, it's the economy that really counts and which is the only thing with sufficient power to swing society and its incentives away from conflict and disasters towards peace and prosperity.

The Humanitarian may respect this argument but will always be suspicious of Developmentalists because they tend to favour whoever is in charge of the State and are always driven by changing fashions in economic dogma. In the eyes of Humanitarians, Developmentalists' statist commitment and economic ideology tends to make them politically biased in practice and not sufficiently caring about those people who live beyond the State in areas controlled by opponents of the government or those people who are the inevitable losers in Developmentalists' grand economic strategies of neo-liberalism, socialism, nationalist capitalism, Islamist economics and whatever comes next.

The Peacebuilder admires the Developmentalist and the Humanitarian for their determination to invest in society and ease its pain. And yet, the Peacebuilder will be wary of them both at the same time because the Developmentalist is often driving economic systems that create social cleavages, inequalities and new "root causes", while the Humanitarian is only ever tinkering at the edges of problems to reduce suffering and is never engaging fully in the pursuit of social justice.

NOT QUITE THREE AND NOT QUITE ONE

The three projects in the triple nexus triangle of international policy sense similarity and difference in their respective missions. Like the



Bakassi camp for internally displaced people in Maiduguri in the Federal State of Borno, Nigeria. A woman demonstrating the small spice market that she has set up with the support of the ICRC.

Photo: ICRC/Taoffic Toure

Should development always have a clear political purpose? A farmer in the Gaza Strip receiving a bucketful of seed.

Photo: ICRC/Alyona Synenko

archetypal Trinitarian struggle around divinity in the western imagination, development, peace and humanitarian action feel themselves to be not quite three and not quite one. Certain principles and purposes mean they are still different persons in a single policy of global public good.

Interestingly, this Trinitarian anxiety is noticeably absent from Chinese and other Asian policy which more easily sees all human suffering – whether from poverty, disaster or war – as simply and singularly met by the full range of government’s socio-economic measures that are at once welfarist, developmental and security-based. Asian policy is relatively free from the moral friction (or fiction?) of the West’s three separate traditions of peace, development and humanitarian action.

A PRAGMATIC HUMANITARIAN APPROACH TO THE NEXUS

There are three undeniable truths in the insights of nexus policy. First, there is a definite indivisibility between the purpose and practices of peace, development and humanitarian action. They share certain common objectives around people’s protection, health, education, prosperity and peacefulness, and they each value a critical mass of order and the rule of law. Secondly, there is also a clear inter-dependency between the three professions. They each achieve better if each one of them is able to flourish, and their three objectives are usually

attained by working in and on the same basic services, the same economy and the same political system. Finally, there is also a profound ethical duty to do three good things at once if this is possible and not to limit yourself to one good thing when all three are doable without damaging each other in the process.

So where is the rub? For neutral and impartial humanitarian organisations, the challenge is around purpose, inclusion and principle. Peace-making and development are both deeply political activities with a clear political purpose to re-shape a polity and generate long-term social transformation for its people. The goals of peace-making and development are the transformation of the State and society.

Humanitarian action is different. Our teleology is one of person not polity. We reach out to all suffering individuals who are in need because of armed conflict and disaster, to “everyone, everywhere” who is in need. We are concerned with these people’s protection and assistance in extremis and with the maintenance of the assets and services on which they rely for their survival. We have no vested interest in a particular political outcome to a conflict. We have no ultimate vision of the perfect society and its ideal development state.

We are also mandated to work explicitly beyond the State with those who suffer in opposition areas and with the relevant authorities who control these areas. This means that any triple nexus which is confined only to

state-controlled areas would be an inadequate nexus for our humanitarian work. A nexus that works for all people in a conflict or disaster is one which recognises the distinct role of principled humanitarian actors and accepts the inclusion of all people in need, whether they live within the control of the state or not, and whether they support the political and development policies of the state or not.

These differences in humanitarian purpose and principle still mean that humanitarian actors can be good nexus players who may complement peace and development initiatives by adding value supporting basic services and meeting a wide variety of individual needs at a time or in a place where development organisations and peacemakers are struggling to achieve. But in addition, they mean that we will always be doing this for the different reason of individual need rather than state-building. We may also be reaching out impartially to include people suffering in areas beyond state control – an action which, in itself, can help sustain development infrastructure and even increase peace by making people feel valued and respected as human beings, rather than excluded.

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