

ROOM DOCUMENT 8

RD 8: Nexus thinking in humanitarian policy: How does everything fit together on the ground? – H. Slim

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Nexus thinking in humanitarian policy: How does everything fit together on the ground?

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Keynote Address by Dr Hugo Slim to the World Food Programme (WFP) Annual Partnership Consultations. Session on "The Triple Nexus of Humanitarian Action, Development and Peace: What is the Challenge for Humanitarian Principles, Operations and Partnerships?".

It is a great pleasure to be with WFP – one of the world's great humanitarian agencies. WFP has done so much for over fifty years to keep people from hunger and starvation in many of the world's most difficult operational contexts.

I first saw WFP in action in the Ethiopian refugee camps of Eastern Sudan in 1985 where they were saving lives with general rations distributed by CARE, and therapeutic rations by Save the Children. I then worked very closely alongside WFP in Ethiopia in 1987 and 1988 when I was with the UN's emergency office. In my experience, WFP people are practical, ambitious and focused on results. It is also a great pleasure to be standing in front of a room full of NGOs. I have a great respect for NGOs and have worked in three of them – each one of them here today. In my experience, NGOs are idealistic, innovative and focused on people. And, of course, it is always reassuring for me to see National Societies from our Red Cross and Red Cross Movement. They are family – rooted, principled, frontline and there to stay.

So all of you in this great room are a wonderful mixture – a rich tapestry of partnership – all joined together in common cause to prevent people from being hungry, malnourished and destitute. Food security is essential to humanity. It is life-giving in itself and a major determinant of many other good things like health, livelihood, education, family, culture and conviviality. Food security is so important that States have agreed it as a human right and a political duty. In armed conflicts, this right and its reciprocal duty have long been clearly recognized and agreed by States. So we can all easily join-up together in common cause for food security. It is a basic good in every human life and across every human society.

And joining-up is the subject of this APM. David Beasley and Fabrizio Hochschild talked about joining things together yesterday and we will continue to talk about joining-up things today. It is very appropriate that we should be talking in Rome because the new magic word in humanitarian policy for joining-up is a Latin word – the ancient language of Rome. This word is nexus.

It is easy to think of a nexus in a policy department. It is a nice new term to frame the old humanitarian problem of combining different good things in difficult situations – life saving, development and an increase in peace. Our new magic word catches the policy imagination. It lends itself to easy diagrams in training courses. It encourages key terms in policy speak like "synergies", "trade-offs", "inter-linkages" and "transmission channels" which break through "silos" and achieve "collective outcomes". We can easily use this jargon to write a policy, or even get a computer to write it.

But what does it mean to make a nexus on the ground? What does it mean for your organizations to work with multiple intentions and hit several different goals at once? This is not a new question – we have all been struggling for years with joining-up things. In people's ordinary lives, the joins are obvious and essential. But the way international aid has been structured in different mandates, bureaucracies, financing and interests makes joining-up difficult. This is why the UN's new policy is an opportunity.

To get us going, I will do three things: First, I will describe the logic of the triple nexus – with some political science and a bit of ethics. Secondly, I will explain how international humanitarian law (IHL) and the ICRC see the nexus, and how we are legally and operationally at ease working across the nexus. Thirdly, I will inject some realism into our discussion. I will identify gaps and barriers in the nexus on the ground, and stress the importance of principled humanitarian action.

What is the Triple Nexus? In Latin, nexus means to link or bind together. A nexus is where different things converge naturally or by design – a point at which they come together organically, or are deliberately joined-up and tied together. In global humanitarian policy today there is a near universal conviction that we should join together different strategic goals and diverse fields of practice as much as possible. This is because people believe that things like hunger and conflict, food security and peace are already causally linked. They determine one another and so need to be addressed together. There is political and ethical thinking behind the UN's new policy turn towards a triple nexus which we need to understand.

The political science behind UN nexus policy believes that development causes peace, and that humanitarian action can help to cause development. So, they should be explicitly linked. UN policy also states that people's lives in armed conflict are a simultaneous struggle for protection, development and peace. This makes it important that we address people's three strategic needs at once. If you believe this, then it makes good sense to do these three things together – in a nexus. This political science is visible in the policy commitments in Agenda 2030, the World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain, the New Way of Working, the World Bank's studies on conflict prevention and, in the UN Secretary General's re-positioning of development and his reform of the UN system into a single seamless mission led by highly focused cabinet leadership. This is the political logic of the triple nexus, which is only as good as the science behind it. If the causal argument between development and peace is weak – and it is certainly simplistic sometimes – then the political logic of the nexus may be weak.

There is also an ancient ethical logic to doing these three things at once. This ethical argument is simple. If you have the opportunity and the capacity to do three good things at once then you should do them, and not just limit yourself to one good thing. This ethical approach to the hunger nexus suggests that your operations should be driven by the following three-step ethical logic: Providing urgent food aid is good for people, but not enough. Enabling food security is best for people. Conflict is very bad for food security. Peace is better for food security so we should also work for peace and political contracts to prevent hunger.

A full ethical approach to hunger should, therefore, involve a triple nexus focus on all three goals: food provision; food security, and a peaceful environment. Only then will we end hunger in a particular place. The moral sense of the triple nexus builds on our ancient ethical insight that some lasting and sustainable form of help is ethically superior to a quick injection of assistance. This ethics is about working with people to change their capacity and the political, economic and environmental conditions around them. Today, this means a focus on climate adaptation, sustainable livelihoods, resilience, an enabling market and political contracts to prevent hunger. This sustainable success is the "end all" ambition of the SDGs, which is embedded in the UN's triple nexus. If you can work on all this in your organizations then, ethically, you should do because a nexus response is a better response for hungry people.

But the "can-you?" question is key here. Is it possible to "do-it-all" on the ground in every situation where you work? Is it operationally feasible? And is it humanitarian-wise, or a problem for your principles?

Humanitarian policy has gone from a double to a triple nexus. The triple nexus of humanitarian action, development and peace supersedes the earlier humanitarian-development nexus. So what does number symbolism tell us about this nexus shift?! The number 2 represents a duality, a tension and a sense of opposites – ying/yan or night and day. The number 3 represents the mystery of the triangle - a transcendent mix of different things which complement each other more than they conflict. The ambition of the new policy triangle is enormous: the protection and assistance of people in extreme crisis; the "end-all" aspirations of 17 SDGs, the prevention of violent conflict and disasters, and the promotion of justice, political stability and peace. The nexus looks like a triangle of everything – especially if we recognize that climate risk and adaptation are in there as part of the SDGs. This triple nexus clearly goes beyond the aspirations of the Red Cross/Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct. The Code emphasizes capacity-building, inclusion, resilience, developmental improvements and environmental sustainability but it does not set its sights on peace.

So, if this is the triple nexus, I now want to tell you about the ICRC's approach to it and the way that IHL sees people's different needs.

What does International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and humanitarian principles say about a triple nexus? IHL is not particular about the timeframe of humanitarian action – it must last as long as necessary. So, humanitarian action is not bound to a practice of short-term relief. Nor does IHL make a difference between humanitarian and development work. The law is essentially blind to this category distinction. IHL's core concern is that civilians and others should be protected and survive. All efforts should be made to limit human suffering and ensure that people can still have life with dignity, even in war. The law is also deeply concerned with protecting and maintaining the objects necessary to the means of survival of the civilian population – their access to natural resources, food, markets, healthcare facilities and to the basic services they need, including the continuity of education for children.

These services obviously vary between different contexts. Access to food and water in South Sudan and Somalia, for example, may be about seeds, wells, irrigation, cattle and grazing. In highly urbanized middle incomes countries, it may mean cash to go to a supermarket or for re-starting a business, or major engineering support to municipal authorities maintaining complex energy and water supply infrastructure. Humanitarian action may work across these different means of survival without discounting some areas as "developmental".

IHL also recognizes that the "reverberating effects" of long armed conflicts create systemic degradation over time which increase people's vulnerability. Attention must be paid to the risk of an ever worsening environment and deeper steps must be taken to mitigate its effects. 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.

Although immune from today's jargon, IHL is concerned with nexus thinking and nexus obligations as they concern the protection of the environment, development infrastructure, and the responsibility of social norms and governance systems to ensure dignified protection and survival.

IHL guides the ICRC's humanitarian operations, and we have long recognized the need to work with short and long-term goals in armed conflicts – especially when conflicts are protracted and last for many years. We call this short-long method a "combined approach" in which we work with two distinct intentions: an immediate intention to ensure people's urgent protection and survival, and a longer and deeper intention to create a "conducive environment" in which the respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) and the sustainable functioning of vital infrastructure systems and basic services continues throughout armed conflict.

Let me illustrate this combined approach and conducive environment from our food and water strategies. A short-long food programme in South Sudan means we make assessments in hard to reach areas and drop food where it is needed – often in close liaison with WFP. This is short-term urgent survival work. In as many places as possible, we also take a longer and deeper view to focus on people's means of survival. So we focus on preventing asset depletion by a vet and vaccination programme which covered 1 million cattle in 2016. We also work with technical partners to develop better quality seed to increase the prospect of high yields if IDPs get the chance to plant and harvest.

In Somalia, we are now in a partnership with the World Bank. We upgrade sub-surface dams, other water catchment cisterns and healthcare to ensure sustainable systems of survival for pastoralists and farmers, and we also distribute cash and food to meet urgent needs.

For many people the ICRC's combined approach stops hunger now and prevents it in the future. We understand a lot of our work as minimal "development holds" – struggling to keep systems and services at basic level to prevent even further development reversals.

What about the peace part of the nexus? The ICRC is not focused on peace-building or peace-making, but the way the ICRC works can create cross-line opportunities and political habits that can serve as resources for peace. Working with all parties to conflict as we do, we often find ourselves building practices of humanitarian dialogue and reciprocity that build cross-conflict contact, trust and confidence between warring parties. These political intangibles are important to peace. The ICRC's dialogues may be about humanitarian access or exchanges of prisoners and the dead. They may involve the search for missing people on different sides of a conflict, or arrange the repair of essential water pipes that cross frontlines.

This humanitarian practice develops a culture of dialogue, reciprocal action and mutual benefit which is a potential resource for peace. Humanitarian dialogues shape a series of confidence-building measures and vital habits of talking which can be leveraged later in political peace processes. The services and systems we help to sustain and improve over years – systems of protection, water, health, food security, detention and family links – may also be valuable resources for peace. Maintaining infrastructure and social systems with national and opposition authorities prioritizes a respect for law, rights and responsibility. It builds political contract, preserves or improves governance capacity, fosters cooperation between people and power, and delivers mutual gain across communities. Sustaining this governance habit may also make peace easier to make when the time is right.

But, as you all know, the nexus is not as tidy as this in practice. It is easily disrupted by violence, climate, financing patterns and hard differences between States. These create barriers that break the links across the nexus easily and fast. There are also three big gaps in current nexus policy. The first is protection. The second is its reach into needs beyond government-held areas. The third is clear recognition of the need for principled humanitarian action to address the first two gaps.

South Sudan and Somalia offer clear examples of hard barriers to the nexus on the ground. Recurrent violence means people may not be able to exploit a nexus strategy with the seed and tools given to them with a sustainable food security intention. New violence means they often do not get to sow or harvest, but end up eating seed. This is the feasibility problem in nexus operations in armed conflict. In Somalia this year, drought has recently pushed more rural people into urban displacement, showing how climate risk can also undermine the feasibility of a sustainable nexus operation.

Finance and government scepticism can be other barriers. Although multiyear financing is increasing, not all governments provide it and not all authorities are able to leverage it well in multi-year strategic planning. In armed conflicts, the capacity of government departments is often deeply degraded. Some powerful States still think humanitarian and development budgets should be kept separate, and that the nexus is a funding grab by humanitarians, or that the nexus obscures the proper place of humanitarian action.

There are gaps as well as barriers in the nexus. The first gap in current nexus thinking is protection. There is an assistance bias in the development policy of Agenda 2030 which focuses heavily on development inputs, outputs and quantitative indicators, like increased nutritional status, reduced mortality, increased incomes, closer and cleaner water supply. But, as your staff see every day, people's safety and protection is a pre-condition of development and peace. If people are being attacked, looted, impoverished, bereaved, besieged and detained, then they cannot get close to development or peace. They are locked down hard in one corner of the nexus triangle. Nexus policy must not develop naively without taking into account the huge challenge of protection on the ground.

The second gap is in areas in armed conflicts where needs are high beyond the reach of the State. The infrastructure of development and the politics of peace, inevitably pull organizations and resources towards State power. But, in armed conflict, people's needs are often very high in contested or opposition areas. In many situations, the humanitarian, development and political resources of the international community may be largely trapped – or deliberately concentrated - on one side of a conflict. This may make for a one-sided nexus that leaves millions of people out. There may also be hard problems of political association across the nexus. Principled organizations – impartial, neutral and independent – may sometimes find it unwise to cooperate too deeply with a particular development or peace initiative which may be perceived as highly partisan by military and civilian opponents.

The third gap in nexus policy, as it stands, is a lack of clarity about the importance of drawing a careful line within the nexus which protects principled humanitarian action, and respects its right to move independently across a conflict. For example, in Rakhine at the moment, it has been essential for the ICRC and the Myanmar Red Cross to shape their own principled engagement. The same has been true in conflicts where the UN is actually a belligerent or widely seen as one-sided. This is why the ICRC will often be leveraging a nexus of its own with the relevant authorities and will not be involved with others in joint needs assessments and specific collective outcomes.

So, we need a sense of realism around the feasibility of nexus operations in many situations where people are most "left behind" and where protection is the paramount challenge before assistance, development and peace. We also need a sense of realism about the importance of principled humanitarian action and its ability to make vital and lawful humanitarian links with authorities and vulnerable populations beyond the State.

In some situations, operational barriers will unravel the nexus and mean it will not be possible for your organizations to be strong nexus players. In other situations, you will be able to play a good nexus game. But nexus policy should not expect that it is operationally feasible for all your programmes to be nexus operations all of the time. Sometimes, your programmes will face disruption that breaks the links across the nexus. Sometimes humanitarian principles will make it unwise to join-up in certain development and peace initiatives. Humanitarian wisdom may dictate that doing one thing well is the best operational option, or that not joining-up is the most principled approach.

Thank you for asking me to start our discussion. I hope I have described the triple nexus and explained the ICRC's engagement across the nexus. It is always our desire to find a triple win in people's lives wherever possible, and we welcome greater involvement by political and development actors to solve the challenges of protracted conflict. I hope I have conveyed our enthusiasm for doing three good things at once wherever possible. But I have also offered a sense of realism – that sometimes the nexus will not hold. Nexus programming will not always be operationally feasible and principled organizations may find risks in a State-based nexus. Now I pass the floor to operational people – the walkers, not the talkers like me!