



The Humanitarian-Development Nexus: A Bridge Too Far?

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SUMMARY

In their basic and caricature forms, development aid and humanitarian assistance highlight important differences that materialize in attitudinal, institutional, and funding obstacles in the implementation of the humanitarian-development nexus. While the nexus is implemented in order to respond to new types of crises characterised by the protracted nature of the conflicts, cooperation across the aisle has proved hard to achieve in practice. However, policymakers and practitioners have different perspectives on the nexus, and

depending on the individual practitioners tasked with implementing the nexus, it can still work. To achieve this, boundary work is needed in order to overcome the distinct segments of the nexus' constituent parts working in silos. To foster such boundary work, actors responsible for implementing the nexus in practice should be given greater autonomy so that the nexus is better sensitised to local actors, contexts and concerns, rather than being driven by headquarters' policy demands.

Introduction

The humanitarian-development nexus refers to “the transition or overlap between the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the provision of long-term development assistance”.¹ Humanitarian action and development aid draw upon different rationalities, formal differences, and institutional systems and cultures that both constitute the starting point and the main dividing line in driving the humanitarian-development nexus. Among policy-makers, the nexus is seen as a way to respond to more complex crisis formations, and the realization that the protracted nature of crises not only hampers development efforts, but also dramatically increases the volume, cost and length of humanitarian assistance. Among practitioners, however, this policy-shift is easier said than done, as the nexus seeks to merge well-established discursive, institutional, and attitudinal differences that are hard to reconcile in practice.

This policy brief outlines central ambitions and problems associated with the humanitarian–development nexus as seen from policy and practice perspectives. With regards to the successful implementations of the nexus, we find that the major obstacles lie in the differences between institutional arrangements and rationalities of humanitarianism and development. On the ‘ground’ however, these issues may be overcome by practitioners working pragmatically towards overcoming institutional barriers to effective cooperation.

The humanitarian–development nexus

While the idea of bridging humanitarian action and development cooperation in response to emergencies has existed since the early 1990s, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) produced renewed interest and initiatives pertaining to the humanitarian–development nexus. It did this through stating the need not only to meet new humanitarian needs but also to reduce risks and vulnerability, as well as to improve reconstruction efforts. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs call for new ways of managing and responding to humanitarian crises and provide a reference framework for humanitarian and development actors to “contribute to the common vision of supporting the furthest behind first and a future in which no one is left behind”.² Strengthening the humanitarian–development nexus thus emerged as a top-priority by the majority of stakeholders of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

The background of the adaption of the nexus was the realization that the protracted nature of crises – which lead to scarce development efforts in many situations where vulnerability is the highest – dramatically affects the volume, cost, and length of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian appeals now last longer and cost more. Humanitarian relief – in its classical form of providing food, blankets, and shelter – is thus not sufficient for the longer-term needs and concerns of those affected by

a protracted crisis. Nor is it cost-effective in remedying long-term concerns with short-term and non-sustainable interventions. The [2016 World Humanitarian Summit](#) therefore agreed that humanitarian tools alone are insufficient for resolving protracted crises. The Summit’s participants shared the vision and moral imperative to prevent crises and reduce people’s needs for humanitarian relief, and to end needs by reducing risks and vulnerability.

As phrased by the UN Secretary General: “We must bring the humanitarian and development spheres closer together from the very beginning of a crisis to support affected communities, address structural and economic impacts and help prevent a new spiral of fragility and instability”.³ First, this means that humanitarians are now expected to engage in conflict prevention and address the root causes of conflicts. These are activities not only typically designated to the development segment but also activities that take place before the crisis occurs. Second, this calls for increased emphasis on humanitarian diplomacy as a way of conflict resolution, thus infringing upon humanitarianism’s apolitical ethos. Third, it calls for greater humanitarian efforts and attention in the post-emergency and reconstruction phase. In operational terms, this means that humanitarian and development actors should engage in joint analysis of needs, risks, and vulnerabilities; share information, analysis, and understanding of the situation; promote joint programming across segments; align planning cycles; and partner with national and local actors to respond to emergencies and humanitarian needs. The Summit’s outcome document stresses the need to pursue collective outcome including actors outside the UN system, in the sense that humanitarian and development actors need to work side-by-side and collaborate in project programming and implementation – a commitment that was endorsed by various UN entities, the World Bank, IOM, donors, NGOs, and crisis-affected states, amongst others.

Bringing these diverse actors together may be hard, as recognized by OCHA itself when proposing a new way of working following the World Humanitarian Summit. The first step is to remove unnecessary institutional and funding barriers to interagency collaboration. Additionally, cooperation across the humanitarian–development divide should be based on collective outcomes. Each involved actor should draw on their respective comparative advantage in operational work and interventions should be context-sensitive and planned over a multi-year time-frame. Achieving this will require broader partnerships among a wide and diverse spectrum of actors on both the traditional donor and recipient sides. Their partnership and the stipulation of a collective outcome require improved coherence, complementarity, and alignment in all phases – including analysis, planning and programming, leadership and coordination, and financing. A shared situation and problem analysis are needed to develop joint

problem statements and priorities. Humanitarian and development actors need joint planning and programming procedures centering on shared objectives, and where actors respect each other's comparative advantages. A designated leader and coordinator needs to be appointed in each operation, and this actor needs to be empowered and control financing mechanisms to ensure all work is moving towards the collective outcomes.

Challenges to the nexus

The nexus seeks to merge well-established discursive, institutional, and attitudinal differences that are difficult to reconcile, especially as seen from the perspective of humanitarian actors. Humanitarian actors tend to share a more principled approach to policy work as compared more pragmatic and political development actors. As the nexus touches upon the very identity and leitmotif of both humanitarianism and development, these interfaces require a great deal of boundary work between erstwhile distinct segments of the international system. Not only are the discursive segments of humanitarianism and development distinct from each other, but the segments themselves are characterised by great internal diversity.

Humanitarian action is exogenous, meaning that its principles and ideas come from outside the affected area, while development aid aims to provide support to and empower beneficiaries' own ideas and initiatives. Development aid is long-term, political in its orientation, centres on rights-based approaches, and seeks to stimulate local processes and empower beneficiaries through inclusive partnerships and participatory programming mechanisms. Humanitarian action, on the other hand, is nominally a short-term and apolitical practice, triggered by the needs of vulnerable people regardless of when and where these needs emerge. The latter points to concerns with the temporal dimension: in the traditional war-to-peace transition, different segments of the international apparatus were designated separate tasks. Here, humanitarians were meant to provide support to those in need during and immediately after the crisis, while development actors would concentrate on post-crisis reconstruction. To humanitarian actors, it meant operating outside its humanitarian space with the legitimacy provided by the humanitarian principles. By engaging in conflict prevention and reconstruction – activities occurring both before and after the crises, this originally being the scope of the diplomacy and development fields – humanitarian actors expanded their operations beyond the humanitarian present.

The humanitarian principles are, however, not blueprints or a straitjacket, but propositions and values that guide action, set standards, and provide benchmarks against which practice aspires and is later measured. This makes the principles subject to contextual interpretation and application by different actors in different settings, which also provides opportunities in juxtaposing the

humanitarian and development realms. For example,⁴ in 2008, the Ugandan government recasted the situation in Northern Uganda from being one of crisis and thus within the scope of humanitarian action, into one of recovery, which is the domain of development aid. Redefining the situation as one of recovery produced obstacles to humanitarian actors and their ability to pay heed to the humanitarian principles. The transition happened in spite of persistent humanitarian suffering and needs in the post-conflict period. The recast had detrimental effects for ongoing activities; 'too many NGOs withdrew too soon with too much unfinished business' was the general story told by informants, arguably leaving a humanitarian vacuum for the many civilians who, after years in the protected camps, were forced to leave, returning to their homelands and districts which had in the meantime received minimal government and donor attention regarding social and infrastructure development. There were, however, important differences in how humanitarian actors responded, which brings attention to whether they have operational autonomy and are able to find local, pragmatic solutions, or if they are compelled to follow headquarters' policy and humanitarian principles strictly defined.

Whereas some withdrew, others took a more pragmatic stance to this recast and humanitarian principles under the auspice of the imperative to help the civilians – regardless of how the situation was being (re)defined. Disagreeing about the underpinning assessment and recognising the persistent concerns, some actors reframed their programmes into development aid, which warranted both operational legitimacy and external, financial support. Despite scaling down their activities due to the plummeting of funds, these organisations gradually aligned themselves with regular development activities such as education, reproductive health, vocational and livelihood training, agricultural extension programmes, building schools, and reintegration projects. Transcending segments involved boundary work, downplaying the unilateral relief and advocacy work based on the humanitarian principles. Additionally, there was need to advance greater partnership with the local communities and their participation in, and ownership of, development policies that were also required to be aligned with the government's national development strategy.

The different responses to the discursively recast situation remind us not only of the heterogeneity of humanitarianism but also the malleability of its constitutive principles: multiple and diverse organisations operate under the same humanitarian umbrella and lend legitimacy to its morally-charged principles and values, regardless of whether organisations share the same interpretation and understanding of what these principles mean and entail in practice. The malleability of the humanitarian principles and concepts lead to a knowledge battlefield in which different actors representing different organisa-

tional cultures and mandates vie over humanitarianism's meaning, interpretation, and application in practice. This malleability is, to some, seen as a way of being pragmatic about humanitarian challenges and principles by enabling more diverse and context-sensitive operational action – meaning that the end justifies the means. Conversely, others see this malleability as undermining the humanitarian principles and the legitimacy they provide for, thus curtailing room to manoeuvre on the basis of humanitarianism.

Implications

The dissonance between humanitarian action and development aid does not necessarily need to be a detrimental obstacle to how the work on the ground functions in the context-specific implementation of the nexus; it can still work in practice. As a trend, we see that operational success is largely dependent on the individuals tasked with implementing the nexus in practice, not so much on the policies and guidelines coming from headquarters. There is a dissonance on the ground as well, but here we see that practitioners are willing to pragmatically negotiate and translate in order to overcome challenges and do what is needed in a particular conflict situation. A learning account is thus that a successful implementation of the humanitarian–development nexus is contingent on actors' pragmatism and ability to sensitise their approaches to contextual factors. This is dependent on which is dependent on the degree of autonomy they enjoy vis-à-vis headquarters' policy and the humanitarian principles strictly defined.

Endnotes

- 1 Strand, Arne. 2020. "Humanitarian-Development Nexus." In *Humanitarianism. Keywords*, edited by Antonio de Lauri, 104-106. Leiden: Brill.
- 2 OCHA, 'The humanitarian-development nexus: the new way of working.' Available at [Humanitarian Development Nexus | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](https://www.unocha.org/nexus) Accessed 23 September 2021
- 3 OCHA. 2017. *New Way of Working*. New York: United Nations.
- 4 This illustrative case is outlined in detail here: Lie, Jon Harald Sande (2017). "From humanitarian action to development aid in northern Uganda and the formation of a humanitarian-development nexus." *Development in Practice* 27(2): 196–207.

This policy brief builds on research published in the following open-access journal article:

[Lie, J. H. S. \(2020\). "The humanitarian-development nexus: humanitarian principles, practice, and pragmatics." *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 5\(18\).](#)

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