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Breaking the Cycle: The Need for Better Integrated Responses in Neglected Crises

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The magnitude of the humanitarian funding gap soars each year, leaving an increasing number of people with no assistance. In 2023, only 35% of the \$56bn global appeal was covered,¹ and anticipated budget cuts from major humanitarian donors will likely worsen the situation.² Neglected crises that do not receive enough media attention and political support struggle to attract financial assistance at scale for humanitarian, development, peace, or climate initiatives.

Following up on the EU Council's Conclusion from May 2023, which emphasised the importance of reducing humanitarian needs by strengthening the connection between humanitarian, development, and peace efforts (HDP nexus), this paper suggests examining how well the nexus approach is applied in overlooked and neglected areas. It proposes to take advantage of the 2024 EU election year to explore new approaches to the current model and makes concrete suggestions to support better coordinated and integrated responses.

INTRODUCTION

The brunt of the humanitarian funding gap hits hard in fragile and crisis contexts, particularly in those that DG ECHO refers to as “forgotten” and that receive little international aid.³ The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) prefers referring to these situations as “neglected crises”, emphasizing that the limited media and political attention, coupled with funding shortfalls, often stem from a deliberate decision to prioritize resources elsewhere over time.⁴

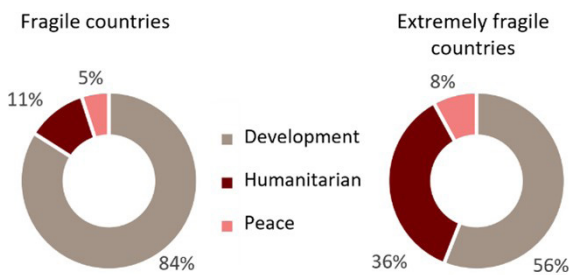
Most of the neglected crises are also protracted and complex.⁵ In 2023, 10 out of the 12 top tier underfunded emergencies (UFE)⁶ of the United Nations' CERF allocation, and 13 out of ECHO's 15 Forgotten Crises (FCA),⁷ were protracted. Altogether, these settings received 32% of global humanitarian funding.⁸ Rather than questioning a prioritisation process that will always prevail, efforts should focus on improving responses to critical needs in these neglected crises.

In 2019, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Mark Lowcock, then Emergency Relief Coordinator, recommended to “build resilience and shrink needs” for a more efficient use of limited existing resources.⁹ While it is commonly accepted in the aid sector that **addressing complex and protracted crises requires a coordinated approach to humanitarian, development, and peace funding instruments**, reality shows otherwise.

Contexts affected by protracted or complex crises receive less development and peace assistance than average recipients.¹⁰ Similarly, countries facing extended crises in addition to showing acute vulnerability to climate change receive disproportionately low amounts of funding for climate adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).¹¹ And when diplomatic relations face challenges, development funds as well as peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts are often interrupted, as seen in recent freezes of European development assets towards Afghanistan,¹² Myanmar,¹³ or Niger.¹⁴ In other words, **development cooperation tends to concentrate efforts on countries with fewer risks or vulnerabilities, where opportunities for growth and development are more tangible.**¹⁵

As a result, much of the foreign aid reaching protracted crises is humanitarian, often to the detriment of other forms of assistance. In the context of a growing humanitarian funding gap, this a recipe for disaster.¹⁶ However, solutions exist — some being successfully experimented by Member States — which could usefully inspire EU funding mechanisms.

Figure 1. Proportion of ODA for development, humanitarian and peace assistance to fragile and extremely fragile countries (SIDA/Development Initiatives, 2023)¹⁷



THE TRIPLE-NEXUS: BEYOND OBSTACLES

Much has already been said about the challenges of implementing effective integrated approaches along the HDP nexus. Existing literature is filled with examples of attempts to overcome leadership, planning, and coordination issues, and highlights enduring siloes. It also sheds light on an ongoing learning process that is largely steered by international aid actors, such as UN agencies and INGOs, rather than by national governments.

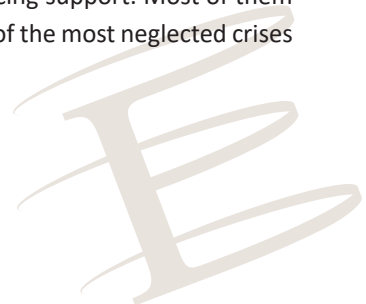
One notable attempt to tackle these challenges has been the **UN Collective Outcome process**, initially introduced in the Secretary General’s 2016 report for the World Humanitarian Summit. As part of the New Way of Working, this process led to diverse experiences in its operationalisation, lessons learned, and good practices across nearly 20 countries.¹⁸ In the field, many of these processes led by Humanitarian Country Teams or dedicated nexus working groups suffered from their informal nature, as they were shaped by the personal or contextual preferences of a UN-dominated leadership.¹⁹

Several years after its first inception, many assistance and cooperation actors are still unfamiliar with the Collective Outcome process, which is often viewed by domestic authorities as a matter primarily relevant to international actors.²⁰

In parallel with this UN-led process, many organisations and institutions have developed their own integrated approaches, leading to a **proliferation of Triple Nexus frameworks** at both global and country levels. It added to the confusion about the positions of leadership and planning authority, and certainly contributed to making it more challenging to rally around the same UN Collective Outcomes banner.

Coordination attempts have often lacked a comprehensive overview of the planning and relief efforts of humanitarian, development, and peace actors, preventing them from aligning their strategies. Not only has this lack of transparency led to inefficiencies, but it also undermined the potential synergies that could have arisen from more collaborative planning. This lack of coordination often originates from the **reluctance of humanitarian organisations**, as primary implementers in fragile settings, to link and align their responses with other agendas. This caution has almost systematically been driven by the necessity to shield humanitarian aid from the risk of instrumentalization and to preserve a strictly principled humanitarian approach. While humanitarian organisations often accept to extend the scope of their intervention in support of longer-term approaches and development agendas, they rarely fully endorse a peace-related approach, whether in support of everyday peacebuilding efforts (lowercase ‘p’), or formal Peace processes (uppercase ‘P’).

Overall, the main obstacle to effective nexus programming remains the absence of flexible or context-specific funding.²¹ Among the 16 contexts evaluated by the IASC in 2021,²² all had some form of completed joint analyses or nexus programming, but 9 suffered from the lack of well-structured financing support. Most of them regularly appear on the lists of the most neglected crises by both ECHO and CERF.



No sound operational planning integrating humanitarian, development, and peace objectives can materialise without visibility on the funding flows.²³ Funding mechanisms are key to operationalising nexus working groups recommendations and shaping a coherent international response. **Without transparent, predictable, and timely funding to support their plans, coordination efforts remain ineffective.**

WHAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE DONORSHIP AND FINANCING SECTOR?

At the core of every successful initiative in the HDP nexus is a unified local leadership with a clear goal. **Equally critical to their success is the financial and institutional backing** that not only empowers these initiatives, but also validates their efforts in the eyes of a wider range of stakeholders.

Currently, the HDP landscape features numerous organic initiatives that are more isolated than interconnected. While the diversity of strategies is key to forging a comprehensive network of local solutions, there is a pressing need for clarity regarding who holds the overall accountability for the bigger picture. Donors have a key role to play here, choosing to support emerging leadership in response to the situation, rather than defaulting to established figures or enforcing a globally conceived framework. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to every situation, but there is a need for clear leadership with adapted financial means to facilitate this process.

Despite the OECD's initial recommendation to prioritise "prevention always, development wherever possible and humanitarian action when necessary",²⁴ **peacebuilding efforts remain a neglected aspect of multidimensional approaches.** This situation is exacerbated by a tendency to focus resources on actions that directly address donor countries' priorities, such as tackling the breeding ground of terrorism or reducing conflict factors leading to major displacements. Too limited funding is made available for peace-building actors seeking to develop and test systemic, contextually sound approaches that could have a much broader impact on cohesion and stabilisation if backed by an HDP framework.

In contexts of degraded bilateral cooperation, prioritising a people-centred approach is paramount. Development funding instruments should be directed toward meeting human basic needs, especially in locations and times of extreme volatility, where the immediate peace and economic prospects are limited. To succeed, this engagement needs to be coupled with coordinated targeting and objectives aligned with humanitarian channels, with the aim to prioritise the needs of local communities. In volatile and degraded environments, development donors – including IFI's – need to adjust their traditional expectations, especially regarding sustainable development, and economic and social returns on investment.

For funding strategies to be truly effective, there is a need for **accountability with finer granularity** extending below the national level. This means paying closer attention to the specific needs and challenges at the sub-national and community levels, moving beyond generalisations often derived from national data. This approach is particularly crucial in fragile regions, where generic funding strategies can overlook the specificities of particularly affected areas. These recommendations eventually point towards an ultimate requirement for donor agencies and financial institutions: a more robust alignment of their various funding instruments in support of a more coherent and efficient response. Within this framework, **reaffirming the specificity of principled humanitarian aid** while recognising its necessary interdependence with the other components of external action should be the core focus of the response, especially in the context of protracted and forgotten crises.

FLEXIBLE INSTRUMENTS AND INTEGRATED GOVERNANCE MODELS

To foster coordination and strengthen the articulation between the various HDP agendas, some lead donors have developed two sets of responses: 1/the promotion of more agile instruments tailored to crises and fragile environments, and 2/ the establishment of integrated governance models.



New flexible instruments

In 1999, the UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) aimed to address the interconnected nature of crises by providing **comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and preventive responses to multidimensional challenges**, and by fostering collaboration among diverse actors. Unfortunately, the Fund struggled to overcome the fragmentation of efforts among stakeholders, resource constraints, and the complexity of coordinating diverse institutional structures.²⁵

In 2013, the European Commission established a series of **trust funds** aiming to deal with “emergency, post-emergency or thematic actions”²⁶ in the context of external action. These trust funds facilitated (1) quicker decision-making, (2) the involvement of both the EU and its Member States, akin to the predecessor of Team Europe, and (3) reinforced coordination among stakeholders. Although they did not resolve the EU’s siloed approach, trust funds had introduced a degree of flexibility that their discontinuation removed from the EU’s arsenal.

Fortunately, development banks have recently shown a renewed interest in **developing agile instruments** tailored to crisis settings. These instruments are now playing a crucial role in implementing more integrated responses, contributing to the resilience of affected communities. The successful evaluation of the **MINKA Fund**,²⁷ implemented by the French **AFD**, exemplifies the effectiveness of developing agile tools that promote collaborative efforts across humanitarian, development, and peace sectors in conflict settings.

The United Kingdom’s **FCDO** recently pledged at COP28 to allocate up to 15% of its humanitarian provisions to building **climate resilience and adaptation**.²⁸ This commitment underscores the central role of **prevention** to enhance resilience in fragile areas. Besides countering arguments against financial contributions to humanitarian aid, which some critics believe might hinder development efforts and be lost for the SDG, such an initiative is a strong incentive for developing instruments supporting **multifaceted responses**.

More integrated models of governance

In addition to adopting agile and flexible instruments, some donors have also embraced **new integrated models of governance**²⁹ for a more coherent and holistic management of their foreign policy tools. For instance, since 2022, the humanitarian and development funding streams of the **Swiss SDC** have been managed jointly within their geographical departments. Despite enduring challenges, this integrated approach allows to foster collaboration and brings coherence to the overall strategy and programming, and may contribute to a more effective response to crises.

For such a setup to be successful, the main resistance is likely to come from humanitarians, in fear of being used. To shield humanitarian aid from being instrumentalised and transformed into an additional tool serving foreign policy goals, a strong consensus needs to exist across the various funding streams to consider the humanitarian component as the first building block.

IMMEDIATE WAYS FORWARD FOR THE EU

The EU is in a unique position to take the lead, pilot, and implement tangible proposals to improve a more coherent approach across sectors at both global and field levels. This can be achieved by promoting concrete means and objectives for a more collaborative approach. Drawing on the successful practices of certain Member States, the EU could position itself as a transformative force through the following three propositions, leading and adapting the response to a rapidly changing world that risks leaving too many behind.

Designing and adapting the governance model of EU funding instruments. In recent years, we have observed a significant transformation within the EU’s Directorate-Generals (DGs): DG ECHO expanding from a purely humanitarian role to encompass crisis management, and DG DEVCO transitioning to the broader mandate of DG INTPA, highlighted by its “Global Gateway” infrastructure investment program. This pivot from a people-centred approach in ODA to a more investment-

driven strategy suggests a need for reorganizing the governance structures of EU instruments. A promising direction could involve consolidating traditional ODA mechanisms under a unified HDP body, which would oversee accountability and coordination, thereby enhancing strategic planning for integrated responses in fragile settings. This entity could either function as an overarching authority over existing DGs, or act as an inter-DG coordinating unit to streamline resilience efforts. Either approach would also serve the purpose of clarifying the distinct roles of investment and loan-based strategies, allowing them to operate within separate frameworks.

Allocating a fixed percentage of the budget of the various DGs to support resilience efforts. This approach would function similarly to an internal trust fund, compelling all EU external assistance instruments to allocate a portion of their budgets to collaborative strategies in crisis-affected and fragile settings. Managing this fund would inherently strengthen coordination by enforcing the legitimacy of the cross-cutting governance entity previously mentioned. Furthermore, it would foster increased interaction and collaboration among DG INTPA, NEAR, and ECHO, require joint reporting on specific targets, and facilitate the establishment of post-implementation accountability mechanisms.

Promoting a Team Europe approach at field level. Coordination platforms designed to implement integrated approaches (nexus working group, HCT-led Collective Outcomes process and other context-specific platforms) face challenges due to insufficient institutional support in generating momentum among all stakeholders. EU Delegations should be encouraged to play a stronger role, backed by their Member States' representations, and act as potent catalysts by:

- **Empowering these coordination bodies:** actively participate in Collective Outcomes or similar processes and request greater accountability for achievements.
- **Streamlining part of their financial contributions** to these outcomes.

- **Mobilising their institutional, diplomatic, and convening power** to ensure the involvement of senior representatives from domestic and regional authorities and overcome potential political shortcomings.

CONCLUSIONS

The analyses and recommendations shared in this note build upon existing literature and the outcome of a 60-expert brainstorming session organised by the Egmont Institute and the Norwegian Refugee Council in January 2024. All agreed that the nature and scale of the needs in neglected crises require much more than an adaptation of existing tools and practices. The siloed approach of EU financing instruments is not adapted to situations that require, on the opposite, more coherence and agility. The EU acting in a Team Europe format constitutes the world's prime humanitarian donor: it has the capacity to set the agenda and can be instrumental in achieving change. In the upcoming months, the European Union's new Parliament and new Commission will have an opportunity to take a fresh look at existing mechanisms and propose adaptations where needed.

The European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) takes place at a strategic moment and convenes the right interlocutors to raise these issues. The success of the EHF will be measured by its ability to foster bold discussions, catalyse effective policy changes, and pave the way for urgently needed reforms.



Endnotes

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