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Governing Complexity in Complex Times: The HDP Nexus and the Role of the UN, the EU and the World Bank

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ABSTRACT


Based on the work conducted with a Nexus-centred network of scholars and practitioners (HDP LAB SYNEX4 Future), an overview is offered of the literature on regime complexity to analyse origins and evolution of the Triple Nexus multilateral approach to the governance of compound humanitarian-development-security crises. The identification of the main institutional features of the UN-orchestrated Nexus policy concept highlights its potential as an innovative attempt at global experimentalist governance. This analysis of the nexus-based approach of the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the World Bank Group (WBG) in three pilot countries – Cameroon, Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – demonstrates that, while coordination has increased, the agency of local communities remains limited and major impediments hinder the inclusion of the peace dimension, an area where separate initiatives by non-Western regional organisations have also stalled. Progress will necessarily depend on the ability of Nexus actors to develop its bottom-up and participatory components, and to improve coordination within the group of like-minded donors who share a clear commitment to a human rights-based, inclusive and prosperous future.

KEYWORDS

regime complexity; Triple Nexus; UN; EU; World Bank Group

IR scholars have long been acquainted with the maxim ‘global problems require global solutions’. During the Cold War, Robert Keohane (1984, 237) noted how “In a post-hegemonic world, the rules of international regimes cannot be reliably enforced through centralised organisations. If we view international regimes, and their international organisations, as attempts to construct hierarchies, or quasi-governments, they will appear weak to the point of ineffectiveness”. In the three decades that have elapsed, power configurations have changed, complexity has grown and new coping strategies have been devised, by states, International Organisations (IOs) and non-state actors. Against the background of an ongoing climate crisis, mutually reinforcing shocks have punctuated the post-Cold War era: a global economic crisis in 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, wars in Ukraine in 2022 and Palestine in 2023. Overall, more and more intense shocks, climate-related and anthropogenic, have generated a context of polycrisis (Lawrence *et al.* 2022).

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Compound humanitarian-development challenges have grown in number and severity, clustering around contexts strained by chronic poverty and militarised violence. By 2030, an estimated 60 per cent of the global extreme poor will live in fragility, conflict and violence-affected contexts (FCV) (WBG 2024). Forcibly displaced people have doubled between 1990 and 2020, due to persecution, conflict and human rights violations. By 2022 their total reached a staggering 108.4 million, largely driven by conflicts in Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Myanmar (UNHCR 2023).

Drawing on decades-long practices in the provision of humanitarian relief, development support and peacebuilding, and based on previous United Nations (UN) experiences of joint humanitarian-development efforts (the ‘double nexus’), in his December 2016 speech at the General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres launched the Triple Nexus concept, urging member states (MS) and stakeholders to join in a collective endeavour to coordinate humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) activities in partner countries (UNSG 2016). Along with UN agencies, the European Union (EU) and the World Bank Group (WBG) have responded to Guterres’ call, and so have the OECD-DAC (Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) Secretariat and several bilaterals. However, while the WBG has broadly aligned with the UN New Way of Working (NWoW, OCHA 2017), the EU has pursued a more independent course, launching its own Nexus strategy (Council of the EU 2017).

Engaging with the global governance literature on regime complexity and based on the work conducted with a Nexus-centred network of scholars and practitioners (HDP LAB SYNEX4 Future), this article unpacks the costs and benefits of a nexus-based approach, analysing the performance and the interaction between the UN, the EU and the WBG in three selected contexts (Cameroon, Myanmar and DRC).¹

Section two analyses the roles played by these IOs in the Nexus’ broad institutional evolution, pre- and post-2016. In Section three, the key institutional characteristics of the Nexus are identified in the regime complex for development financing and its potential as an innovative attempt at global experimentalist governance (GXG) is discussed, *vis à vis* enduring hierarchic, regime- and organisation-specific traits. Section four focuses on the performance of the UN, the EU and the WB in the three case studies, highlighting the positive contribution as well as the failures and unintended effects of their actions. Section five uses these findings to reassess the hypothesis on the GXG features and transformative potential of the Nexus, in light of competing typologies (enduring regime- and organisation-specific hierarchies). Section six discusses the policy implications of these results, cautioning about the difficulty of including the ‘peace leg’, and arguing that any meaningful Nexus progress also depends on improved coordination within the group of like-minded donors who share a clear commitment to the protection of human rights, social justice and sustainable futures.

¹Seven interviews were conducted with EU, UN, WBG and NGO officers between 2019 and 2023, with informed consent and under confidentiality, with additional information gathered from the participants to the HDP LAB SYNEX4 Future Seminar Series (2019-20-21-22), as well as to two international conferences organised by the Global Governance Research Group – UNA Europa. See the Online Annex for additional details.

Tackling cross-policy challenges multilaterally: the UN, the EU, the WBG and the evolution of the Triple Nexus

The humanitarian-development ‘leg’ of the Triple Nexus was the first to be engaged multilaterally, during the African food crisis in the 1980s (Singer 1985). However, it was the post-Cold War (apparent) success of the US democratic unipole and the rise in number and severity of civil wars that provided traction to include the peace component. Multilateral priorities shifted from emergency relief in climate-related disasters to the provision of good governance, peace and security. Humanitarian emergencies generated by conflict and fragility suggested that relief and development activities often had to be implemented in parallel, with flexible timings and targets (Duffield 1994; Buchanan-Smith and Maxwell 1994).

The UN’s 1992 Agenda for Peace provided the key impetus for democratic peacebuilding (Doyle and Sambanis 2000), while in 1994 the WBG created the Holst Fund for the Palestinian Authority, inaugurating its own approach to development in fragile contexts through multi-donor post-conflict trust funds (TFs) (WB 1993; 2011; WBG 2020). In turn, the European Commission issued a milestone communication on ‘Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development’ (LRRD) (EC 1996). In addition to overcoming the sequential logic of ‘continuum’ models of development (relief first, development support later), and substituting it with a ‘contiguous’ template (Lindahl 1996), the EU provided a powerful institutional basis for the multilateralisation of the LRRD. The ‘linking-thinking’ was innovative and forward-looking, but its implementation proved particularly challenging. Relief aid was often used to finance conflict management, yet humanitarian staffs appeared “insufficiently cognizant of the political origins of vulnerability”, and “were unable to design appropriate responses” (Macrae and Harmer 2004, 9). In addition to ‘humanitarianising security’, humanitarian action was ‘developmentalised’, even if development practitioners remained practically absent from zones of conflict and fragility (Hilhorst 2018).

Two major turning-points redefined the debate between HDP practitioners at the turn of the century: the UN-sponsored millennium development goals (MDGs) and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The first alerted donors on the pro-poor effect of non-aid policies, while the second triggered a pervasive securitisation of aid flows (Carbone 2007; Macrae and Harmer 2004). Development aims were linked to security policies in conflict management and peacebuilding, and development policies became prominent tools to prevent war and help reconstruction, over and above humanitarian relief.

In its 2005 Humanitarian Reform Process, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) incorporated early recovery in development action to be pursued at the local level to “secure stability; establish peace; [...] and build core state capacity to manage political, security and development processes” (Bailey *et al.* 2009, 5). The WBG launched a ‘war on poverty’ (WB 2001), creating its first post-conflict reconstruction group. Along with the occupied Palestinian territories, Iraq and Afghanistan attracted the majority of WB TF resources in that period, becoming *de-facto* trial sites for the cooperation between HDP actors. Through the creation of the State and Peacebuilding Fund (SPF) in 2009, the WB set up its largest multi-donor TF to finance activities in fragile, conflict and violence-affected contexts. In 2011, it published an authoritative report on Conflict, Security and Development, becoming a key player in

the multilateral effort to support development under challenging security conditions (Baroncelli 2019). The EU, in turn, was keen on forging its own path in both development and humanitarian tracks. Cooperation with developing countries was coupled with the promotion of democracy and human rights through positive conditionality, in a clear attempt to distance EU policies from the neo-liberal excesses of the Washington Consensus (Ibid). In 2005 the first EU Consensus on development was issued, followed by the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid of 2007, which reaffirmed the EU's previous commitments to the LRRD, but also stressed the need to smooth transitions, and to improve the link between relief and development aid at the earliest stages of response (ECHO 2007).

Through the tripartite EU-WB-UN Declaration on Post-Crisis Recovery Planning and Assessment of 2008, the Commission joined the existing UN-WBG cooperation on Post-conflict Needs Assessment and Transitional Results Framework (UN and WB 2007), launching post-conflict joint Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment Tools (RBPAs), which to this day continue to inform Nexus-relevant joint context analyses.²

Post-9/11 aid securitisation, however, had fueled tensions between the European Commission and the WBG management on inter-organisational cooperation in FCV countries. At the end of the decade, the EU's concerns about delegated resources to WBG trust funds had peaked, leading to an even more independent approach to development finance, through the launch of the EU blending facilities (Baroncelli 2021).

By the mid-2010s, peacebuilding failures in Bosnia-Herzegovina, post-2011 Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan had showed the limits of the neo-liberal stabilisation approaches (Richmond 2021) that in most cases had informed UN, EU and WBG endeavours. Far from 'doing no harm', stabilisation through market liberalisation had instead supported authoritarian incumbents against oppressed minorities. Compared to the previous decade, civil wars had more than doubled, accounting for 80 per cent of humanitarian needs as they became longer and more intense (Caparini and Reagan 2019). A massive rise in migration flows and the concomitant escalation in displacement trends also explain the timing of the Triple Nexus' institutionalisation (DuBois 2020). In 2015, the forcibly displaced peaked at 65.3 million, crossing for the first time the 60-million threshold in the history of the UNHCR, and topping global statistics (displacement) since the aftermath of World War II (UNHCR 2016). The interrelation between soaring humanitarian needs and the nature of new, longer civil wars had been apparent to practitioners (WB 2011; Human Security Report 2012). However, it was only when major donors were shaken by terrorist attacks in European capitals and by massive refugee inflows into the EU, that the peace component regained political salience. By 2016, UNSG Ban Ki-moon had declared human security a priority of any emergency operation, urging UN members to tackle – and anticipate – the root causes of conflicts.

Preparatory work to institutionalise the Triple Nexus (UNSG 2016) had been extensive: the 'double' humanitarian-development nexus featured prominently in the UN Agenda for Humanity (AfH), endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) of May 2016. On that occasion, the UNSG and executive apexes of eight UN agencies drafted a plan to synergise short-term humanitarian priorities with long-term development outcomes (later called NWoW), which was endorsed by the WBG and the

²Between 2008 and 2018, 75 assessments were produced in response to disasters and conflicts (EU, UN and WB 2018).

International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The WBG and the UN also signed a Partnership Framework for Crisis-Affected Situations in 2017. A UN-financed instrument, the Humanitarian Development Peace and Partnership Facility (HDPP) was created to support UN-WBG cooperation in joint analysis and programming-implementation of the Nexus. The leadership was attributed to UN Resident Coordinators (RC) or Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) in partner countries. In addition to this partnership with the UN, in March 2020 the WBG further targeted its efforts on nexus activities, launching a dedicated strategy for FCV contexts.

In parallel, the EU had issued its own elaboration on the UN-sponsored AfH to bridge the humanitarian-development divide, through a document presenting EU Council conclusions on the Nexus (Council of the EU 2017), adding in 2018 an explicit reference to the conflict and peacebuilding components (Council of the EU 2018). The operational emphasis, however, was on internal coherence and cooperation between EU institutions and MS, in line with the new EU Consensus on Development (2017). In contrast to the immediate launch of a UN-WBG framework, the EU had chosen from the start a more independent path to implement the Nexus (Veron and Hauck 2021, 2).

Conceptualising the Nexus: regime complexity and emerging experimentalism

Early institutionalist regime theories focused on international cooperation through single-institution and single-issue area regimes (Hasenclever *et al.* 1996). Since the end of the Cold War and particularly after the 2008 crisis, new agreements and institutions have been superimposed on pre-existing ones, and regimes have evolved into ‘regime complexes’ (Alter and Raustiala 2018)³ due to system-wide political shocks, increased issue density and task expansion (Bierman and Koops 2017, 15; Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 24). Institutional proliferation has in turn impacted on the politics of cooperation. As a result, the layering of parallel, imperfectly overlapping and potentially conflicting authority claims has brought increased complexity.

While not being a new regime complex, the Nexus policy concept is an example of increased regime complexity. On the one side, it possesses post-hierarchical features, such as indirect governance by orchestration, and also exhibits several experimentalist traits, such as open-ended goals, a networked approach to policy definition and monitoring, and a strong emphasis on the role of local knowledge and agency (De Búrca *et al.* 2014). On the other, however, many Nexus efforts still conform to the logics of vertical delegation typical of discrete regimes.

Originally orchestrated by the UN, the Triple Nexus relies on the contribution of multiple actors (local communities, states, IOs, NGOs) at different governance levels. In the words of Kenneth Abbott *et al.* (2015, 4) “orchestration entails the creation, support and integration of a multi-actor system of indirect governance, to pursue common goals that neither the orchestrator nor the orchestrated players would be able to achieve separately”. In most cases, the UN RC/HC supervises the work of dedicated Nexus Advisers/

³“A regime complex is an array of partially overlapping and nonhierarchical institutions that includes more than one international agreement or authority” (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 329). Regime complexity refers both to the approach that advances “a new conceptualization of the international politics of cooperation” and to its empirical referent, that is, the densely institutionalised international environment where states and non-state actors interact (346).

Coordinators, who in turn coordinate small ‘Nexus teams’ of UN officers. In addition to drafting country action plans in cooperation with other partners, Nexus Advisors/Coordinators and their Nexus Task Forces foster government ownership and coordinate implementing agencies to ensure community engagement. In other cases, however, a single organisation is mainly involved, and the coordination occurs primarily at the intra-organisation level (as in the case of the EU’s Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM) in Myanmar). Hierarchy is not absent, but redefined and at times contested, depending on contextual conditions.

The following analysis focuses on the UN, the EU and the WBG, as their past HDP efforts have each provided key institutional foundations to the different Nexus components. Currently, they are also the main multilaterals engaged in its implementation. While the UN is ostensibly the main orchestrator of the Nexus, ‘Team Europe’ (that is, the EU and its MS) appears to be the only collective player in a position to back Nexus efforts with worldwide primacy in ODA (Official Development Aid) provision and unparalleled political traction in many partner countries. Finally, in addition to being the focal institution in the regime complex for development financing, the WBG is undeniably the UN’s main multilateral partner in development-related Nexus activities.

Since the 1990s both the EU and the WBG had pioneered in-house approaches to pursue at least some of the goals incorporated in the Nexus policy concept. Technically a UN organisation, the WBG had strategic incentives to endorse the Nexus policy concept, as its apolitical nature made it imperative to rely on IOs that could legitimately operate across politically sensitive domains, the norm in FCV contexts. The EU could also mobilise its own considerable resources in support of an autonomous triple-policy approach, while both subscribing to the UNSG concept and taking a more independent course. Plausibly, the UN near-universal convenorship offers the Commission a powerful anchor to induce compliance by the different HDP cultures (and services) of the EU and its MS, yet the Nexus concept allows enough flexibility for Team Europe to preserve the EU’s autonomy in relations with partner countries.

According to its early formulation, GXG is characterised (i) by a shared perception of a common problem; (ii) by the creation of a framework for a common understanding on how to respond to such problem to achieve open-ended goals; (iii) by the implementation of those goals by actors at lower governance levels, based on their knowledge of and adaptability to local contexts; (iv) by the constant production of feedbacks from local contexts on outcomes that are peer-reviewed horizontally; and ultimately (v) by a regular reassessment and redefinition of goals and practices (De Búrca *et al.* 2014).

First, as reconstructed above, the HDP venture originated from a shared perception among the donor community that Triple Nexus challenges in fragile contexts would be best addressed as a common problem (criterion 1). The linking-thinking approach of the 1990s and the impetus behind the poverty-reducing, democracy-enhancing post-conflict reconstruction efforts of the 2000s, were rooted in widely shared understandings of the interdependencies between HDP challenges. After the launch of the 2030 Agenda and the ‘governance through goals’ via the Sustainable Development Goals, the AfH and WHS set the stage for Guterres’ speech of December 2016, which framed the HDP challenges a single ‘nexus item’ for the first time.

Second, immediate steps were taken by the UN (NWoW in OCHA 2017), the WB, the IOM and the EU (Council of the EU 2017), to develop a common framework towards the definition of open-ended goals to address cross-policy challenges in fragile countries (criterion 2). Collaborative endeavours followed, with the creation of a UN-WBG Partnership Framework for Crisis-Affected Situations (2017) and a UN-WB Joint Steering Committee on Humanitarian and Development Collaboration (2018). Most notably, the elaboration of an OECD-DAC Joint Recommendation on HDP linkages was the first multilateral document that provided both principled and operational guidelines to bridge the gap between high-level goals and existing processes on the ground (OECD 2019).

The Nexus approach also conforms to the third characteristic of experimentalist governance, the preference for lower governance levels to implement such open-ended goals. Implementing agencies (mostly national or local political authorities, INGOs – International Non-Governmental Organisations – and NGOs) have been explicitly singled out as key players in the complex cross-policy nexus effort, as their knowledge of the local context, and closeness to timely information, are indispensable conditions to activate adaptable responses on the ground.

Additionally, however, and different from other forms of adaptive management that do not empower local actors explicitly (Holley 2010), their reporting to multilateral partners on site (UN RC or HC, EU Delegations) as well as HQs (Headquarters), has resulted in a continuous stream of feedbacks, the fourth characteristic of GXG. The multiplicity of evaluation exercises, sponsored at virtually all governance levels (IOs, bilaterals, consortia of INGOs and NGOs), often conducted in a consultative, horizontal fashion, confirms the plural character of HDP peer-reviews that is typical of deliberative policy processes of experimentalist governance.

Fifth, Nexus means and goals are evaluated and redefined through continuous assessments. Pilot projects were launched by the UN-OECD DAC (INCAF and IASC Group 4) and an OECD Interim Progress Report published in 2022.⁴ Inter-agency coordination has been further institutionalised, while self-assessment exercises have been supported by the EU and several bilaterals (Veron and Hauck 2021). The WBG and UN agencies produce regular updates on their Nexus activities which, while specific to each programme or funding facility, are aligned with the NWoW and Nexus flagship policy concepts. Evaluations of Nexus projects by CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) in the three policy communities are issued on a continuous basis (Baroncelli 2023; Swithern and Schreiber 2023).

While not an essential component, a ‘default penalty’ setting for non-compliance features among the sub-criteria listed as typical of GXG.⁵ However, Gráinne De Búrca *et al.*'s (2014) case study – environmental governance under the Montreal Protocol – differs from the cross-policy Nexus approach in several respects. The Triple Nexus is – by definition – a voluntary scheme, underpinned by UN Agendas and Resolutions, EU

⁴The International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) was established in 2009 as a subsidiary body of the OECD-DAC, to provide guidance on post-conflict aid (OECD 2012). Created in 1991 as a service within OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), the IASC (Inter-agency Standing Committee) monitors humanitarian assistance, assembling several UN agencies and organisations, as well as prominent humanitarian and development INGOs.

⁵A default penalty for non-compliance is not included in the five constitutive criteria of GXG, yet De Búrca *et al.* (2014, 478) argue that “GXG regimes frequently operate in the shadow of a ‘penalty default’ that induces appreciation of the relative benefits of joint efforts by sanctioning non-co-operation”.

Council Conclusions and an OECD-DAC Recommendation. Unlike the Montreal Protocol, Nexus commitments are indeed not legally binding. Furthermore, noncompliance by adherents is not met with automatic countermeasures. From a policy-analytic angle, the Nexus implementation replicates delegation dynamics that are typical of development financing and involve multiple accountabilities and authority claims, by donors, recipients and intermediary organisations (Baroncelli 2019).

The Nexus at work: early UN, EU and WBG performances in Cameroon, Myanmar and the DRC

Nine years after the UN-WBG-EU Joint Declaration on Post-Crisis Recovery Planning and Assessment (2008), no joint HDP facility had been created, with programming and financing still squarely in the hands of each separate organisation (IASC 2017, 3). The analysis of Nexus activities in Cameroon, Myanmar and the DRC conducted below, however, indicates that progress on the ground by the three organisations also depends on their ability to remain engaged and coordinate, to involve local and, when possible, national actors. The three countries belong to 25 pilots selected to test the UN NWoW in 2018, by tracking progress in Nexus activities (OECD 2022). On peace-related grounds, both Myanmar and the DRC are challenging scenarios to analyse Nexus performance, ranking first in East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, on major conflict and fragility indicators (namely, number of refugees and internally displaced persons [IDPs], intensity of state-based violence, number of armed groups and active conflicts, level of internationalisation of domestic conflicts: see Uppsala Conflict Data Program [2022]; UNHCR [2023]). Myanmar also offers an opportunity to assess the EU's own approach to the Nexus, independent from the NWoW. Finally, Cameroon hosts one of the most elaborate Nexus Task Forces and shows an impressive network of engaged stakeholders in multiple convergence areas to date.

The UN and the Nexus in Cameroon: a recipe for success?

While accounting for just 2 per cent of Cameroon's ODA inflows in 2018, the UN coordinates most Nexus activities in the country, as most bilaterals do not have resident missions (Devint 2020). Chaired jointly by the UN RC and HC, a Nexus multi-actor Task Force (TF) was set up by the UN in 2019 upon request of the government. So far, the TF has organised the activities of more than 130 HDP players (from a starting group of 80 in 2020), directing ODA to three areas of crisis: the North and Far North regions, in the Lake Chad Basin, where Boko Haram has exerted a destabilising impact; the East and Adamawa regions, where refugees from the Central African Republic have increased since the escalation of conflict in 2014; and the Southwest and Northwest regions, where the conflict between the English speaking minority and the government began in 2016. Despite intensified violence and escalating humanitarian emergencies, in 2018 these three regions had received a mere 9 per cent of Cameroon ODA inflows (Ibid). Thanks to the UN-led TF, a national Recovery and Peace Consolidation Strategy (RPC) was prepared in cooperation with the government, to address the needs of IDPs and host communities in the three target regions during the Covid-19 crisis. In 2021, national and regional authorities worked alongside the UN, WBG and

other Nexus stakeholders to launch a Roadmap to operationalise the Nexus and approve a Cameroon-dedicated Trust Fund (Government of Cameroon *et al.* 2023). An HDP Coordinator has also been appointed, reporting to the UN RC but responsible for country-wide HDP activities (IASC 2021). Additional Nexus positions were financed by bilateral agencies and two new Regional HDP Task Forces were created in 2020 in the Far North and Eastern Front, funded through the UN Trust Fund for Human Security respectively (Government of Cameroon *et al.* 2023, 21). Nexus experts are to be appointed in selected municipalities to ensure constant engagement with local communities (Swithern and Schreiber 2023). Government ownership has been supported through an *ad hoc* Nexus Support Group led by the Prime Minister's Office (Government of Cameroon *et al.* 2023, 21), and progress has been achieved in inter-organisational cooperation, particularly between the UN and the WBG (11-12).

Compared to 2023, when 4.7 million individuals required humanitarian assistance, 4.3 million are expected to be in need in 2024. However, the total humanitarian aid budgeted for 2024 (USD 376 million) will provide only for 2.3 million for people in need (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2024). The announced Cameroon Trust Fund has not been established, as doubts exist in the UN about the creation of an “immediate response window for humanitarian funding gaps” (Government of Cameroon *et al.* 2023, 22). Concerns also exist about the financial and staffing sustainability of the existing Nexus governance structure.

While coordination has improved, more should be done to connect the municipal-regional levels with national authorities. As of early 2024, the Nexus approach has not been integrated into Cameroon's 2030 National Development Strategy. Lastly, a meaningful inclusion of the peacebuilding component requires the UN to reach out more convincingly to political leaders on reconciliation practices and inter-communal violence. Serious concerns exist about the Government's ability to end the extra-judicial killings perpetrated by security forces against the English-speaking minority in the Northwest and Southwest regions (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2024). As discussed above, and compared to 2018, Nexus efforts have helped to focus the attention of domestic and international players on Cameroon's previously neglected crisis regions, paving the way for new coordination schemes and unlocking additional resources to support HDP activities. However, on the peacebuilding track, more should be done to uphold human rights for all citizens, hold national security forces accountable, stop attacks from armed separatists and ensure safe humanitarian access to the areas of crisis.

The EU in Myanmar and the Nexus Response Mechanism: expectations and prima facie evidence

Second among the recipients of EU humanitarian aid in the Asia-Pacific region in 2024, after Bangladesh (European Commission 2024), Myanmar has become the epicentre of a major humanitarian crisis. Current EU support to Bangladesh provides assistance to almost 1 million Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar after the military crackdowns of 2017.⁶ Since the coup of February 2021, Brussels also helps other countries

⁶A Muslim ethnic minority that has been living for generations in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar (formerly Burma), the Rohingyas have been the target of violence and systematic violation of basic human rights. Since 1982 they have been

in the region to address the refugee crisis prompted by the internal conflict between Myanmar's military junta and ethnic armed groups (EC 2024). A pilot country for the EU Nexus activities, Myanmar has received a total €393 million of EU humanitarian aid since 1994. Brussels has also supported the political transition since the competitive elections of 2015 by convening the multi-donor Joint Peace Fund (JPF). Managed and implemented by UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services), the JPF was budgeted USD 100 million over the period 2016-21, to support efforts to achieve an inclusive peace between Myanmar's Government and the Ethnic Armed Forces.

While publicly advocating the need to respect human rights, the UN was heavily criticised for its allegedly tepid response to the government's persecutions of the Rohingya people, targeted by systematic ethnic cleansing since 2017. Nonetheless, most UN agencies have remained engaged, while the EU has again partnered with UNOPS to launch the NRM in 2020. Starting with a very limited budget (USD 15 million), the NRM provided a potential platform for the EU to support mediation between Myanmar's domestic actors, particularly in light of the difficulties encountered by the UN RC (Mathieson 2022) and the major scandal that developed at the UNOPS headquarters in Copenhagen (Gridneff 2022; Fahrenthold and Fassihi 2023).

Originally, the NRM was used to address the root causes of Myanmar's conflict and refugee crisis in a transformative fashion, supporting 'structural changes' to ensure the rights of all communities, reduce their vulnerabilities and enhance their long-term resilience (NRM 2020). A strong argument in favour of a greater role for the EU in the country, particularly in light of the UN's declining legitimacy, was also its extensive partnerships with other IOs (WBG, UNHCR, IOM) in the support to Rohingya refugees and host communities in the Cox Bazaar Camp in Bangladesh.⁷ Yet, the overall effectiveness of the NRM against the Nexus benchmarks remains at best questionable, as is the impact of the EU leadership on democratic and peace-related outcomes.

Since the 2021 coup, and in spite of the UN's and EU's repeated calls to restore democracy and stop the "human rights neverending nightmare" (OHCHR 2024), the situation has deteriorated further. As of 2024, one-third of Myanmar's citizens (18.6 million individuals) are in need of humanitarian support, compared to 1 million citizens in need before the coup. Like other EU endeavours in Myanmar, most of the NRM budget has been reallocated to humanitarian needs (ECHO 2023). Mirroring the UN position, Brussels has supported the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its Myanmar Special Envoy's efforts to negotiate a peaceful solution (Council of the European Union 2024). Signed in April 2021 by both the Military Junta and ASEAN partners, however, the ASEAN 5-points Consensus has not produced tangible results to date (Worley 2024). Coupled with a strict adherence to the principle of non-interference,

denied citizenship, becoming the largest stateless population and most persecuted minority worldwide. Their situation deteriorated further when a *de-facto* military campaign, fueled by militant ethno-nationalist groups in the Rakhine State, was launched against them by joint national and Arakan Army forces in 2017 (Zarni 2024).

⁷The EU-UNHCR-IOM cooperation finances Nexus activities in the Cox Bazaar's Refugee Camp (Bangladesh), where nearly one million Rohingya refugees fleeing from Rakhine have been settled, in an attempt to promote at once emergency relief and development support to both refugees and host communities. While Bangladesh has accepted Rohingya's refugees from Myanmar for decades, its incentive to keep doing so has been drastically reduced by rising costs from natural hazards and Covid-19 challenges to poor Bangladeshi communities.

internal divisions among ASEAN MS have substantially confined it to little else beyond perfunctory declarations (Human Rights Watch 2022).

This begs the question of how the EU could rely on a Nexus approach to pursue a goal that escapes the efforts of a major regional actor such as ASEAN. The answer seems obvious: it could not and certainly not on the basis of the relatively small NRM pilot alone. Yet several insights can be drawn from the previous analysis. NRM Myanmar has provided a privileged venue for intra-organisational dialogue between DG DEVCO (INTPA – NRM’s main financial supporter), DG ECHO and EEAS (ADE 2021, 44).⁸ While taken for granted at face value, fine-tuning of the Union’s HDP goals is a much welcome development that should not go unnoticed. Overall, however, the blatant political failures of both Western and Asian multilaterals, suggest the need to re-target Nexus efforts strategically in support of the pro-democratic Myanmar groups.

The WBG and the cash-for-work social safety net Nexus scheme in the DRC: bridging the humanitarian-security gap through development support

While essentially a development bank, the WBG has also developed in-house expertise to support communities during protracted crises, when emergencies become chronic. Through its innovative shock-response social safety net programmes, the WBG has played a strategic role in the activation of Nexus responses to the conflict-health-humanitarian emergencies that broke out in the DRC, during the Ebola crisis and later during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among the most advanced pilots, the development leg of Nexus activities in the DRC rests on a sophisticated inter-organisational structure. In 2018 a Senior HDP Adviser was deployed by UNDP to work under the UN RC and establish a multi-stakeholder Nexus working group. A Partner coordination group was also created, co-chaired by the UN and the EU, to gather together bilateral donors, WBG and UNDP representatives. Since then, an HDP Specialist and a Japan-funded HDP officer also sit in the RC office, and two additional HDP coordinators have been deployed in the target regions of Tanganyika and Kasai. Five stakeholder groups constitute the ‘Core HDP Team’, and an HDP Partnership Facility has been created, within the Peacebuilding Fund, to finance an HDP Partnership Advisor posted in Goma, designed to support UN-WBG joint projects (OECD 2022).

Between April and December 2019, the WBG cash-for-work social safety net project provided 12,000 temporary jobs to individuals living in Ebola hotspots. Implemented by the government and financed through WBG resources under the multi-donor SPF, the project advanced essential infrastructure work on roads, and restored access for aid and humanitarian workers to local communities. In addition to alleviating the emergency needs caused by the Ebola epidemic, the project enabled practices that proved key to re-establish the affected communities’ trust in the role played by external actors (Bisca and Grumelard 2020). Humanitarian workers and UN peacekeepers had been attacked by

⁸Since February 2021, the EU Commission’s Directorate-General for Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) has been renamed as Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA). Nexus activities entail close cooperation with DG European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

armed groups in the Eastern part of DRC. The subsequent politicisation – and militarisation – of the transnational effort to contain the Ebola crisis in East DRC made many civil society organisations suspicious, and in some cases hostile to health providers and MONUSCO blue helmets (Congo Research Group 2021; Dessu and Yohannes 2022).⁹ In the context of Nexus activities, however, MONUSCO personnel cooperated with the UN and the WBG to gather data on conflict trends that would become crucial for the success of the 2019 WBG cash-for-work social safety net project. Thanks to a constant monitoring of local conditions, Nexus partners were able to reach the communities in need, adapting responses to the constantly changing conditions on the ground. The WBG also advocated successfully for an additional USD 50 million cash-for-work contingency fund under the IDA19 window,¹⁰ to support peacebuilding activities through the DRC Eastern Recovery Project. Currently, the Project for the Stabilisation of Eastern DRC for Peace (STEP) has become IDA's flagship social protection programme, providing safety nets to 530,000 individuals (USD 93 million in cash, unconditional, for work, investment grants or to finance entrepreneurial training) (WBG 2023).

Since the deterioration of relations between the DRC and Rwanda in 2022 and the surge in conflict-related deaths (the highest since 2017 [UCDP 2022]) in the Eastern provinces of Ituri, South Kivu and North Kivu, USD 250 million have been budgeted to STEP. This initiative supports government strategies, but is to be implemented at the provincial level to decentralise governance and provide community-based stabilisation and reintegration support to affected populations (WBG 2022). In line with the WBG 2020 FCV Strategy, continued engagement during the crisis is a key pillar of STEP. Similarly, WBG recruitment of nexus-experienced staff confirms that the organisation is keen on coupling its long-term development support with conflict-sensitive achievements that are also conducive to more effective peacebuilding.

Efforts to integrate the peace dimension however remain particularly challenging, both with respect to the protection of emergency health workers and to the perception of armed personnel by local communities. After the UN withdrawal of MONUSCO peacekeepers at the end of 2024, at the request of DRC President Félix Tshisekedi on grounds of counterproductive achievements and amidst ongoing conflicts between the myriad armed groups, Nexus activities will have to climb an even steeper slope to succeed.

Reassessing the Nexus potential: hierarchy, experimentalism and the challenge of integrating peacebuilding

While a consensus exists on the need to address compound HDP crises through better coordination, the creation of Nexus facilities in support of targeted inter-organisational

⁹Deployed in the DRC since 1999 – first under MONUC (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo); since 2010 as MONUSCO (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo) – UN peacekeepers have been heavily criticised by both CSOs and INGOs for their costly, ineffective and at times counterproductive role.

¹⁰IDA (International Development Association) is the concessional agency of the World Bank Group. Its financial support to least developed countries is delivered in three-year policy frameworks, financed by contributions by its member states. The nineteenth replenishment (IDA19) covered a shorter period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2022 (instead of 30 June 2023), due to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on financing needs in IDA countries.

cooperation seems essential for the success of Nexus activities on the ground. When the efforts have occurred within a single organisation, as with the EU NRM in Myanmar, the gains from a Nexus approach have been limited to coordination between services (ECHO, EEAS, INTPA), with little progress on the ground.

The Nexus experimental nature has however allowed multilaterals to ‘take turns’, or supplement each other, once conditions worsened on the ground, as shown by UN-WBG cooperation in the DRC. When negative perceptions of MONUSCO peacebuilders escalated into violent rejection of Doctors Without Borders-Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) health professionals in the midst of the Ebola 2018 crisis, WBG emergency cash-for-work infrastructural projects secured continuous access for humanitarians, while also helping to restore trust among local communities.

Compared to previously separate HDP activities, the Nexus concept has provided considerable traction to deepen the dialogue between the three professional communities. Moreover, the governance approaches coordinated by the UN RC Offices in Cameroon and the DRC, respectively, have shortened the distance between local communities, regional Nexus facilities and country-wide Nexus Task forces.

In financing matters, however, the Nexus post-hierarchical, deliberative and consultative features give way to top-down, supervisory legal and fiscal accountability processes that are typical of delegated cooperation in development policymaking. Relying on policy-analytic concepts, early theorisation of global experimentalist policy (De Búrca *et al.* 2014) focused mostly on domestic or EU regulatory policies (environment, electricity). Development, humanitarian and peacebuilding policies (all examples of foreign sectoral policies) escape such theorisation and veer on the distributive (or re-distributive) end of Lowian policy typologies.¹¹ While there are regulatory traits with respect to the eligibility of cases (for example, demands for HDP financing must meet agreed standards for intervention), Nexus endeavours involve distributive effects but also potential re-distributive conflicts (across policy sectors and between taxpayers in donor countries, and government authorities and poor communities in recipient countries). In addition, the Nexus financing has revealed a top-down, fragmented, heterarchical dimension that does not sit well with the experimentalist ideal type.¹² Funding facilities must indeed report – often across long delegation chains – to their respective formal intermediaries and final principals (governments, UN agencies, WBG units, EU DGs, INGOs Boards). The UN does not have comprehensive principality rights to retain implementing – or disbursing – agents responsible if things go awry on the ground or along the delegation chain. Overall, the hierarchical leverage that different donors have over the entire policy process may – depending on circumstances – greatly reduce the horizontal, flexible and participatory traits of the three-pronged Nexus concept.

The Nexus holistic nature is in this respect both a blessing and a curse. High flexibility across governance levels, actors and sectors (including beyond HDP, to integrate climate

¹¹Prior to choosing ‘constitutional policy’ as the fourth type in its typologisation exercise, Löwi had envisaged ‘foreign policy’ as a fourth case, along with distributive, regulatory and re-distributive types (Löwi 1964, 689).

¹²According to Jack Donnelly (2016, 1) heterarchies are “systems of multiple functionally differentiated non-territorial centers arranged in divided or tangled hierarchies”. Similar to scholarship on regime complexity, he uses the concept to describe a tendency inherent in the 21st-century international system, where governance is becoming multi-level and multi-actor at the same time. Different from GXG, however, heterarchies imply a heavy vertical (hierarchical) overlay by supranational structures (as in the European human rights regime and to some extent in the global human rights regime).

change, gender and education [EC 2021]) seeks to offer an integrated response to needs that are multidimensional yet perceived essentially as unitary by individuals on the ground. That holistic nature however makes the search for coherence and complementarity more difficult even within the same policy area and organisation, often limiting the benefits from Nexus endeavours for local communities.

Beyond localisation, empowering local agency through the Triple Nexus requires a broad reconsideration ('a mindset shift') and major efforts to coordinate existing systems (ODI 2024, 3). Pioneering humanitarian initiatives on people-centred responses indicate that development activities (beyond immediate relief) are what is most asked for by local communities (ODI 2024). In this respect, the role played by UN RCs will be crucial to advance the kind of 'inter-paradigm learning' advocated to sustain adaptive integration between the humanitarian and development legs of the Nexus. As recently echoed by the UN RC/HC in the DRC: "Development should almost never stop. [...] In crisis context, we can call it emergency development. [...] agriculture cannot wait; health cannot wait; job creation cannot wait; business development cannot wait; building a house cannot wait. [...] This is also the nexus at work." (Lemarquis 2022). Piloted since 2023 in South Sudan, Colombia, Niger and the Philippines, the OCHA Flagship Initiative has supported the launch of participatory assessment tools and co-planning, providing incentives for citizens and IDPs to forge locally-led responses and supporting communities in lobbying their national authorities for transformative solutions. Community engagement is not pursued systematically in humanitarian response plans though, and is still far from the fully-fledged empowerment of local communities. Major efforts will be needed if the rigid, top-down yet highly fragmented UN system for humanitarian programming is to adapt to local needs, let alone coordinated with the HDP systems of other major players.

Progressive community empowerment has also advanced a bottom-up inclusion of peace support, the latest and most challenging addition to the Nexus policy concept. Evidence from HDP programmes using an Integrated Conflict Prevention and Resilience (ICPR) approach in the DRC and Myanmar, has unequivocally validated the positive role of conflict-sensitive HDP bottom-up initiatives, such as livelihood support programmes, to ease competition over land resources between elite-backed armed groups in North Kivu, and provide complementary support for both Rohingya and host communities in joint development activities in the Rakhine State (Norman and Mikhael 2023). Forbidden by Myanmar's Junta, direct peacebuilding activities have instead been successful in the DRC when they have integrated local knowledge, and pre-war traditional (pre-colonial) conflict mediation processes that also included marginalised groups.

While the innovation potential of the Nexus concept lies in no small part in its experimental, participatory and bottom-up components, a meaningful inclusion of the peace dimension must necessarily integrate the top-down, or 'big P' dimension as well.¹³ This requires a serious reconsideration of the options available to external actors on how to engage with governments in contexts that are often characterised by high levels of informality, weak governance and selective collusion with non-state armed groups.

¹³Big P' refers to country- or region-level stabilisation efforts, either military or diplomatic, often aimed at restoring the legitimacy of country authorities. 'Small p' indicates peacebuilding efforts to improve inter-communal dialogue and social cohesion at community level.

Further and more systematic research is needed to investigate the conditions under which Nexus endeavours should support non-state armed groups that supply essential public goods in areas of absent state governance, especially when they are the sole providers of entry corridors for aid (such as in the DRC, or in present-day Syria). Equally, however, continued attention should be devoted to fine-tune ‘big P’ and ‘small p’ endeavours, to limit the appropriation of locally-led progressive Nexus initiatives by outsiders that curtail the agency of local communities to suit their own agendas.

Conclusion

The Triple Nexus approximates several aspects of governance through regime complexes, while also retaining regime- and organisation-specific patterns. Critics blame the loose nature of cross-policy governance ties and a persistent siloed mentality, arguing that multiple accountabilities do not bode well for a common solution to the ever-present funding problem of aid. Sceptics further contend that the redundancy inherent in regime complexity has led to sub-par outcomes from mounting competition between a higher number of actors (OECD 2022).

Unlike traditional single-issue regime-creation processes led by states, the Nexus endeavour owes much to the institutional orchestration of the UN and some of its Secretary-Generals, which strategically coupled cross-policy challenges with solutions that also advanced the organisation’s mandate in the three Nexus policy areas. While recent evidence indicates progress in the humanitarian-development track, both within the UN (through the Flagship Initiative) and the EU (NRM in Myanmar), as well as between the UN and the WBG (DRC, Cameroon), the inclusion of the peace component remains a daunting challenge. A major unresolved issue is the persistent tension between the neutral, people-centred humanitarian approaches on the one side, and the overtly political, state- or system-centred methods possessed by peacebuilding and, at times, by development support, on the other. Humanitarians interviewed for this study have lamented a new securitisation of their efforts (as occurred post-9/11), with priority given to long-term stabilisation goals over immediate humanitarian needs. Armed peacekeepers on the ground – even in highly insecure regions (such as in North Kivu, DRC) have worsened citizens’ perceptions on Nexus peace goals, often reinforcing a culture of violent retribution for incurred offences by locals, which has in turn deterred the neutral provision of live-saving health services by nurses and doctors on the ground. However, the absence of protection for health providers has also exposed them to armed attacks, forcing the closure of medical facilities amid major epidemics (MSF 2022). Improvements have occurred since 2023 in North Kivu, on the bottom-up inclusion of direct peacebuilding activities under the UN-led Flagship Initiative, through the launch of Nexus co-created conflict mediation mechanisms that incorporate traditional (pre-colonial) win-win adjudication practices.

Overall, however, there is still a nebulous understanding of how peace should be conceptualised for Nexus purposes. Further research is needed on the conditions that facilitate meaningful integration between state-centred ‘big P’ Nexus efforts with ‘small p’ bottom-up community-based initiatives. According to the OECD-DAC Chair, Nexus efforts should

Never underestimate the politics. We need to redouble our efforts on the P of the HDP Nexus and I think that is the peace but also the politics. There is a real role for diplomats in this [...] so maybe we need to become not trilingual but quadrilingual to include them too (Moorehead 2022).

While the forced withdrawal of MONUSCO peacekeepers from Eastern DRC, after 25 years of continued presence, shows the limits of external militarised support to conflict resolution, diplomatic efforts from Western and non-Western actors have also been broadly inadequate. The UN passivity in Myanmar after the 2021 coup, and Brussels' hesitant stance on closer cooperation with the UN and the WBG, are undeniable symptoms that the EU's and UN's diplomatic priorities for the region lie elsewhere at the moment. ASEAN-led initiatives (like the 5-Point Consensus) have achieved little beyond consultations and the appointment of a Special Envoy, and appear structurally impaired by MS' strict adherence to the principle of non-intervention.

Similar to MONUSCO, regional peacekeepers from SADC (Southern African Development Community) and EAC (East African Community) previously deployed in the DRC have also been asked by President Tshisekedi to leave the country. In addition to meagre results on the peacebuilding front, however, African regional peacekeepers have also been accused of unrestrained violence against civilians, and of acting on behalf of other African countries involved in Eastern DRC conflicts (particularly Rwanda and Uganda).

The poor results of regional efforts by ASEAN donors and African peacekeepers, however, should not obscure the UN's lackluster performance on the inclusion of the peace component. While the UN's multi-mandate nature allows it to operate simultaneously across the three policy areas, in practice the UN Security Council veto system has consistently obstructed the activation of its peace-support tools, leaving the organisation mainly as a humanitarian multi-purpose agency, with a residual ability to support development efforts (Malloch Brown 2022). The EU, in turn, has devised its own Nexus approach, often remaining at the margins of the UN-WB partnership. Inter-organisational competition is one possible outcome of regime complexity, when authority is contested across sectoral and agency-specific hierarchies. In the case of Nexus governance, the cost of such competition between the EU and the other two organisations has been less impactful policy dialogue with partner countries and weaker support for the integration of the peace leg into the Nexus triad.

Whether it is peacebuilding through emergency development, or conflict-sensitive protracted humanitarian care, a more solid multilateral effort is required to support the Nexus' ambitions. External actors will also need to redefine their vertical approach and enhance the Nexus' bottom-up adaptive components, if they wish to advance its transformative potential. Progressive actors should equally work on the macro-dimension of peace support, forging alliances against the appropriation of Nexus programmes by authoritarian players, to promote a fairer and forward-looking implementation of Nexus policies.

On several counts, the HDP Nexus embodies the ambiguities and preference for heterogeneity internal to the UN, certainly the most global multilateral governor. In other respects, it reflects the priorities of other long-standing Bretton Woods IOs, such as the WBG and the EU. While further research is needed on how non-Western players approach HDP compound challenges, this article has advanced conceptual insights

and a performance analysis that suggests cautious optimism. The Triple Nexus remains to date the most ambitious multilateral endeavour to advance a rights-based, collaborative governance effort to preserve the integrity of human lives, in a context that is open to transformations towards a more inclusive, prosperous and peaceful future. As such, it merits perhaps more attention than it has received so far.

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