

## Experience of Danish CSOs working with the operationalization of the Humanitarian - Development - Peace (HDP) nexus

### BACKGROUND

Global Focus is seeking to promote joint analysis and understanding amongst Danish CSOs on how to operationalize the Humanitarian - Development - Peace (HDP) nexus. Workshops and a broader learning initiative will seek to advance joint learning through open and practice-oriented discussions on opportunities, difficulties, and diversities of the triple nexus.

The report presents learning of the concrete work done by Danish CSOs and their partners in complex operational contexts as discussed during a virtual workshop on March 3rd. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule. To ground discussions and illustrate dilemmas, potentials and challenges of applying a nexus perspective, operational examples from Syria and the Central Sahel encompassing a wide selection of the HDP nexus (hereinafter: the nexus) were presented and debated in more depth. While discussions had an initial focus on these geographies the report does not look to make generalized recommendations in acknowledgment of the importance of context.

The report is meant to stimulate wider inspiration and is part of Global Focus' dialogue with the Danish MFA on how to take the work on the nexus forward also in the coming Danish humanitarian and development strategy (forthcoming).

Danish CSOs and local partners engaged in the March workshop:

Action Aid DK, Caritas DK, CISU, Conducive Space for Peace, Croix-Rouge Malienne, Dan Church Aid, Danish Muslim Aid, Danish Red Cross, Danish Refugee Council, Danmission, Mission East, Oxfam Ibis, Oxfam, Save the Children DK, Save the Children, TASSAGHT, and Violet.

### UNPACKING THE TRIPLE NEXUS

Nexus thinking is not a panacea for handling the complexity of humanitarian and development settings but the insistence on strengthening the coherence between humanitarian, development,

and peace interventions, and either bridge or break down silos between systems, within systems and within organizations, is a perspective that provides interesting learning and asks fundamental questions to the way aid is today conceptualized and handled. Following the DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus<sup>1</sup>, the unpacking of the nexus is structured around three core themes, namely programming, coordination, and financing. The themes are naturally interlinked and with mutual dependencies.

## PROGRAMMING

The Danish CSO base brings considerable experience when it comes to testing, struggling with, and successfully applying a nexus approach to programming. The discussed operational examples stressed the need for also in the early phases of a response to develop integrated programme portfolios and prioritize resources to establish *proper advocacy and policy capacity* either within organizations or, preferably, in close collaboration with local actors. Such analytical and multi-sector programming capacity is needed to both base the ongoing activities on a solid analysis of the context, and to instill longer-term perspectives and thinking from the onset.

The case studies discussed (Syria and central Sahel) serve as a clear reminder on the *importance of context*. The engaged CSOs shared a concern about stakeholders, including many donors, not fully appreciating the importance of having all programming be carried out based on adequate conflict analysis of the specific operating environment.

Taking Syria as an example, parts of the country remain in acute crisis while longer-term programming and nexus thinking could materialize in other parts of the country had it not been for political constraints and sensitivities. Some CSOs expressed that the capacity, experience, and knowledge is available on the ground, but that funding with long-term perspectives are direly missing due to the political situation. As formulated by one workshop participant:

*“We are able to implement the triple nexus. We are waiting for the discussions to stop. The communities are waiting for it. But how it is now, seeing the concept of the triple nexus, it remains more of an idea than reality for Syria.”*

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, OECD/LEGAL/5019

## Localized programming

Localization is about a real “shift of power”. In direct support of arguments laid out in the Grand Bargain and acknowledging the importance of geographical and cultural proximity to populations in need, the localization of programs is a priority consistently highlighted by the Danish CSO base. This commitment entails striving towards putting local actors at the center of all aspects of the nexus and seeking close engagement with local civil society and authorities alike. The focus on working better and more synergetic with local partners is evident across the report while selected arguments relating specifically to localization of programming are given below.

With reference to the commitments made in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness<sup>2</sup>, local CSOs continue to call for a *harmonization of approaches and simplification of procedures*. While the engaged CSOs acknowledge that there are many reasons for the current system, the seemingly growing complexity of requirements unfortunately risks keeping back localization ambitions, as local actors struggle with navigating systems and procedures. The need for simplifying procedures related to logistics, finances and administration was highlighted to facilitate implementation.

There is widespread appreciation among Danish CSOs of the need to support local structures and actors in their delivery of quality programs or do it together in joined-up partnership constellations. To do so in a *Do No Harm* way, one highlighted learning was to carefully develop conflict-sensitive designs that take into consideration particularly the constraints and risks of local actors. As the risk profile of local actors may differ from that of their international peers, such risk analysis should remain a high priority.

The importance of ensuring that local actors are at the center of nexus discussions and programming is visible across the report, and captured in the below quote from a CSO representative in the workshop:

*“If we want to take the nexus seriously, we can’t leave out the local actors. It’s like talking about the development of a country, without talking with the government of that country.”*

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<sup>2</sup> OECD (2005): Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264098084-en>.

## **Peace-oriented programming: ‘Little P and Big P’**

The effective integration of a peace element to programs continues to pose challenges and dilemmas of various sorts for Danish CSOs, which the report therefore dedicates more attention to as per the ambition to stimulate learning.

Several concrete examples of ‘double nexus’ approaches, i.e., the combination of humanitarian and development thinking, were shared during the workshop. In situations of acute crisis, support is effectively provided with a base in existing community-based relations and approaches, established networks of staff, volunteers and other stakeholders, and building on productive ties with local and central authorities. There is appreciation of the need for better integrating peace-oriented approaches and some good practices for doing so, but several challenges and dilemmas were also highlighted.

*The first challenge* is the unpredictability of emergency situations that, by nature, are hard to plan for and which may occur in geographical areas that are new to responding organizations. Resources are often already stretched by responding to immediate needs and getting a first overview of context and conflict dynamics, and the engagement in peace-oriented programs that goes beyond confidence building and tension reducing measures are often only integrated later in a response cycle.

*The second challenge* is the continued need to demystify and align understanding of ‘the P’<sup>3</sup> and ensure joint understanding among organizations. Some humanitarian and development actors stress the need for ‘little P’ approaches such as social cohesion and bottom-up community engagement, while there is concern among CSOs on the perceived attention given by donors on ‘big P’ engagement with links to stabilization efforts.<sup>4</sup>

*The third challenge* relates to ongoing debates around stabilization and peacebuilding and the risk of blurring the lines between humanitarian, development and ‘big P’ actors including not least the

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<sup>3</sup> Distinguishment is often made between ‘little p’ actions with focus on building the capacity for peace within societies, and ‘Big P’ actions that support and sustain political solutions and securitized responses to conflict. *IASC 2020: Exploring Peace Within the Humanitarian- Development-Peace Nexus (HDPN). Issue paper, October 2020*

<sup>4</sup> For more on how ‘little P’ is defined and understood in the HPN nexus and how Danish CSOs seek to operationalize this, see ‘Conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity: Definitions of key terms and ways of operationalizing them’ (Global Focus, Nexus Working Group, 2021)

military. Examples were provided from contexts where international presence was perceived to prioritize hard security and top-down peacebuilding interventions, and where military personnel engage in providing humanitarian support with or without proper consultation. In consequence, local communities find it difficult to differentiate between actors, their mandates and motives, which breaks down trust and holds back bottom-up and community-driven peacebuilding processes from materializing.

While working with the 'P' does come with a risk of politicizing the work of agencies, the engaged CSOs articulated a joint commitment to continue enhancing the organizational capacity to see through the challenges and opportunities linked to effectively integrating 'the P'. While the task at hand may be complex, solid, and well tested approaches including conflict analysis and Theory of Change (ToC), are acknowledged ways to activate a required nexus type thinking. Localized conflict analysis and social cohesion work at community level was highlighted as key to providing a strong community foundation and gateway also for conflict sensitive humanitarian and development programming. The analysis shall translate into approaches with a focus on reducing intra- and inter community tensions, stimulating dialogue between communities and with authorities, addressing conflicts related to issues such as access to land, and developing activities that reinforce trust and building dialogue tracks.

## COORDINATION

*“There are no quick-fix solutions to deliver on the transformative goals that drive nexus thinking. We should be open to sometimes see coordination as having a value on its own.”*

The experience base of Danish CSOs include consortia constellations that have successfully translated the transformative mindset of the nexus into concrete structures and programmatic frameworks. The workshop provided several examples of how actors with different mandates, access strategies and sources of financing have collaborated around joined-up analysis, programming, and advocacy.

While the upside of such consortia is obvious there are numerous challenges to overcome. The structure of large and complex civil society organizations has over time become more specialized in implementing activities - either directly or together with partners - and do so in a manner that meets complex donor requirements and follows a range of standard operating procedures (SOPs). To strike compromises on ways of working, procurement regulations, safety analyses, and, at

times, stretch its mandate to a level of discomfort, requires adaptability, willingness to strike compromises and dedication of not least the country level senior management to navigate expectations between and within organizations.

Even if donors and other stakeholders appreciate the complexity of efficient consortia coordination, the experience is that the partners are still expected to organize themselves and start implementation with little delay. This poses the dilemma that while coordination, joined-up analysis and planning is essential, it extends the inception period before actual programs can start, which adds both internal and external pressure on the consortia partners to show results and ‘deliver’. Such dilemmas should be expected and negotiated with donors and among the engaged stakeholders from the onset.

When it comes to engagement in *formal inter-agency coordination structures*, most notably local and national CSOs find it challenging to gain the desired level of influence in the established coordination structures such as the cluster system, which are, by nature, led by UN agencies. For the larger CSOs (mainly international), co-leadership of clusters or working groups is one strategy to pursue influence and better representation of nexus perspectives, but such engagement needs to be carefully weighed up against time and costs requirements. Among the most inspiring examples was the cluster coordination for Northwest Syria that have established goals of 50/50 participation of international/national actors as well as on male/female representation. Such examples are today seemingly driven by individuals rather than representing a systemic change, but worth highlighting and use to instill similar change in other contexts.

A cap on seats is in place in several contexts, which may make the coordination more focused and manageable but which also risk resulting in international and national CSOs competing for seats in direct collision with the spirit of the localization agenda. Lastly, processes that deliberately include, involve, and promote women remains a challenge across most coordination structures.

## FINANCING

Despite the recommendations<sup>5</sup> to make predictable, flexible, multi-year financing available to actors across the nexus, *nexus-ingrained financing* remains a novelty even if recent practices of the Danish MFA were highlighted as an example to follow.

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<sup>5</sup> OECD, DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, OECD/LEGAL/5019



CSO voices collectively call for longer-term and more risk tolerant financing, but they experience - at large - the opposite and continued siloed thinking among many donors. Local CSOs are further facing challenges with accessing funds with a time horizon and flexibility that allows for a more predictable coverage of their basic organizational costs. In consequence, they try to design and plan for the long-term but does so on a slender financial foundation.

CSOs are in general challenged by meeting short-term project objectives under often very adverse contextual conditions. A dominating focus on delivering short-term results preoccupies actors on the ground and restricts long-term planning and engagement strategies from being developed. The observation from CSOs is that financing available still lacks the design and incentive structure – hard or soft – to allow projects to factor in nexus thinking in times of acute crisis. It was further suggested that donors consider flexible and multi-year funds with specific allocations to all three aspects of the nexus and costs to ensure their coordination and synergies.

The relatively new but much-discussed theme of anticipatory and forecast-based financing is a theme that increasingly engages CSOs. It carries the potential to utilize financing more effectively and use data to inform interventions and plan before disaster strikes, a feature often highlighted in nexus discussions.<sup>6</sup> Planning according to sophisticated scenarios is naturally not new to neither humanitarian, development, or peace actors, but technological gains have recently provided opportunities for scale and allowed for ways to combine subject matter expertise within organizations and advanced mathematical models.

The workshop allowed for exploring a few examples where the unlocking of financing to facilitate preventive or early action has been linked to data-driven trigger mechanisms, developed in close collaboration between multiple stakeholders including state authorities. Such project designs remain complex not least on the technology side and also require a Do No Digital Harm thinking and analysis<sup>7</sup>, but it also carries the potential to unblock several challenges of operationalizing the nexus as it contributes to longer-term perspectives and the opportunity for joined-up analysis and preparedness.

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g., IOM (2017): Operationalizing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus. Lessons from Colombia, Mali, Somalia and Turkey.

[https://publications.iom.int/fr/system/files/pdf/operationalizing\\_hdpn.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/fr/system/files/pdf/operationalizing_hdpn.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For more on doing no digital harm, see e.g. The Centre for Humanitarian Data, <https://centre.humdata.org/>

Emergency financing is most often restricted to specific and time-bound purposes and typically prioritizes projects with a ‘horizontal’ potential, i.e., the ability to reach as many as possible. There are naturally solid humanitarian arguments to back this focus, but it effectively rules out initiatives with longer inception phases or with higher installation (CAPEX) costs, even if these could be considerably more cost-efficient and environment friendly in the medium to long term. Most humanitarian responses face this challenge which again contributes to the growing financing gap affecting operations.

Despite such structural barriers, the work of Danish CSOs in humanitarian contexts still include inspirational examples on how to better factor in the life-cycle costs (environmental, social, and financial) of interventions<sup>8</sup>, and use such analysis to convince donors to put in place solutions with somewhat higher start-up costs but considerably lower operational costs and a reduced environmental footprint.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

With a base in concrete, operational examples and practices, the report has presented challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas that Danish CSOs experience related to operationalizing the Humanitarian - Development - Peace (HDP) nexus.

It is recommended that the following issues are further investigated during the continued learning journey led by Global Focus:

- Localization
  - How can the challenges related to a lack of harmonization of approaches and requirements among donors and INGOs be addressed?
  - Is there scope and interest for a joint Danish position, Danida and CSOs, that seeks to promote more flexibility and risk willingness among other donors?

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Life-Cycle Cost Approach (LCCA), see [https://wash.unhcr.org/wash\\_taxonomy/value-for-money/](https://wash.unhcr.org/wash_taxonomy/value-for-money/)



- Peacebuilding (little p)
  - Localized conflict analysis and the enhancement of social cohesion at the local level is instrumental not just for peace-oriented initiatives but for programs across the nexus.
  - How can the work of Danish CSOs and their local partners be strengthened in a way that creates clarity and clear guidance?
- Financing
  - Available financing remains, at large, of a short-term nature with direct consequences for the types of consortia and programs that can be funded. How can the Danish CSOs, potentially alongside Danida, advocate for a shift towards more flexible, multi-year financing?
  - Is there scope for Danish CSOs to make better use of the flexibility that does exist with funding from Danida?
- Organizational readiness and self-reflection among CSOs
  - How can the systems, structures, and procedures of Danish CSOs best support the development of ambitious nexus approaches? Should organizations consider internal “nexus readiness assessments” to gain deeper understanding on intra-organizational blockages and potentials, or how can this be taken forward?

*GLOBAL FOCUS*

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