

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES:

DEEP DIVING INTO CHALLENGES OF THE HDP NEXUS

DEEP DIVE



Many civil society organisations have good conceptual understanding of the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) nexus. Nevertheless, several still face difficulties. In response, Global Focus developed a comprehensive approach – a "Deep Dive" – to thoroughly analyse challenges and promote ongoing improvement. This learning report aims to provide insight into how the Deep Dive was conducted, and how the gained experience can be – and has been – leveraged.

The actions taken after the Deep Dive have demonstrated the importance of simplifying complex nexus concepts and translating them into practical organisational practices and realities. The intention of the Deep Dive was to initiate a dialogue and generate ideas, and this report is intended to inspire CSOs, peers of Global Focus, donors, and other stakeholders.

Main takeaways:

- Encouraging shared understanding and collaboration by breaking down internal silos within organisations
- Addressing organisational systems, procedures, culture, and mindset that hinder the agility, flexibility, and adaptability required for operationalising the nexus.
- Promoting local leadership by adopting flexible funding and long-term planning approaches

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INTRODUCTION

Many Danish CSOs have good conceptual understanding of the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) nexus and continue gaining experience in implementing it in ways that fit their mandates and operational reality¹. Nevertheless, several still face difficulties. Over the past two years, Global Focus and its Nexus Working Group has examined key issues and obstacles that organisations encounter when translating nexus theory and policy into practical applications.

In May 2021, Global Focus released a paper that outlined challenges hindering HDP Nexus programming and thinking based on discussions with our members and their partners. The discussions identified specific challenges, and it was suggested that further investigation was necessary to address them effectively. In response, Global Focus developed a comprehensive approach - a "deep dive" - to thoroughly analyse these challenges and promote ongoing improvement. The primary objective of the Deep Dive was to ensure that the underlying causes of challenges were identified and effectively addressed, as the foundation for achieving more sustainable change.

During the first half of 2022, Global Focus hosted five sessions that concentrated on each of the challenges and presented practical solutions. The sessions included external perspectives and experiences and prioritised the provision of concrete programmatic examples and learning to propose effective solutions. The Deep Dive was co-developed with a Core Group of seven member organisations².

This learning report aims to provide insight into how the Deep Dive was conducted, and how the gained experience can be – and has been – leveraged by the participating civil society organisations (CSOs) to further operationalise the HDP Nexus. Acknowledging that CSOs across geographies face similar challenges, the hope is that this learning report can serve as inspiration for others who are striving to operationalise the HDP nexus to deliver outcomes for people in need.

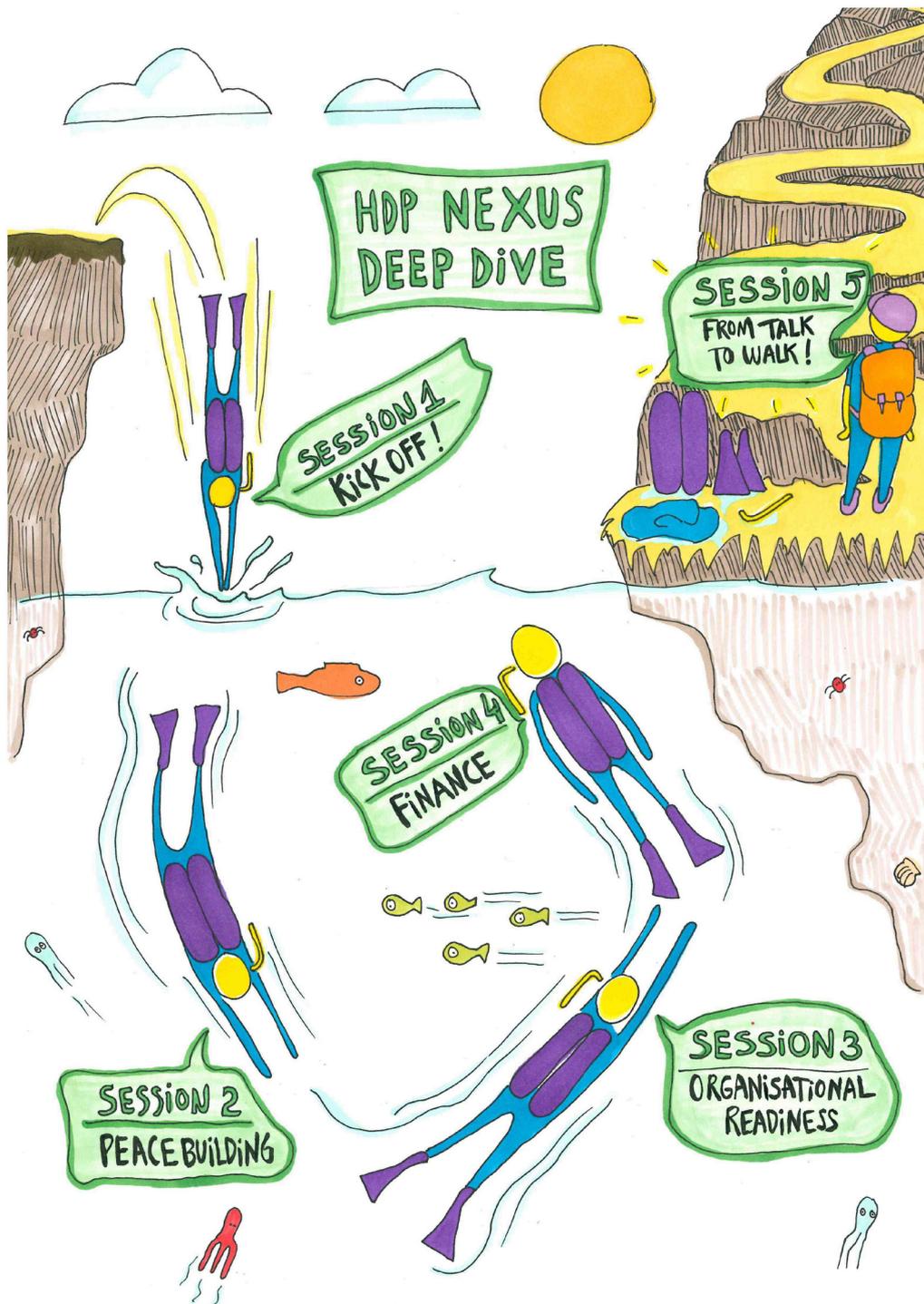
The report includes specific tools utilised by the participants to identify problems, assess potential solutions and their consequences, and prioritise actions. These tools are not specific to nexus-related concerns, as they are agnostic and can be applied to a variety of issues.

1) See https://um.dk/en/danida/results/eval/eval_reports/danish-support-to-civil-society-22 for an assessment of how Danish COs work with nexus approaches from 2017 to 2020, commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2) Acton Aid Denmark, ADRA, Danish Red Cross, Danish Refugee Council, Mission East, Oxfam IBIS, PlanBørnefonden.

THE DEEP DIVE PROCESS

The Deep Dive addressed topics that Danish CSOs themselves had highlighted as requiring discussion and direction. In addition to focusing on three specific themes that primarily concerned subject matter experts (session two, three, and four), the management of CSOs and staff from the Danish MFA took active participation in the kick-off and final sessions.



SESSION 1: KICK-OFF

What ambitions related to the nexus guide Danish CSOs, and what are the Danish MFA's expectations from CSO partners in light of the recently signed multi-year Strategic Partnership Agreement³?

SESSION 2: DEMYSTIFYING THE 'P'

What measures can be taken to provide Danish CSOs and their partners with the necessary guidance for effective nexus implementation?

SESSION 3: ORGANISATIONAL READINESS

What organisational structures and procedures can best facilitate the implementation of ambitious nexus approaches?

SESSION 4: NEXUS FINANCING

How do CSOs use funding to support nexus programming, and how can Danida funding, including multi-year agreements, best support nexus objectives?

SESSION 5: NEXUS APPROACHES TOWARDS 2025

How do the recommendations and proposed actions resulting from the deep dive resonate with CSO leaders and the Danish MFA?

A variety of formats were intentionally employed in the 5 sessions, including:

1. Peer-to-peer exchanges
2. Focusing on all three thematic areas of the nexus and involving colleagues from "support" functions to gain their buy-in and support
3. Hosting "sit-downs" for internal discussions to facilitate knowledge and idea-sharing
4. Inviting top-level management to ensure strategic and leadership involvement
5. Bringing in external partners (such as MFA, research institutes, EU, and local partners) to expand perspectives and strengthen alliances
6. Seeing the nexus through three levels (see below) and acknowledging that successful change requires efforts across all levels.

3) The Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPA) refers to the agreements that the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have signed with 18 Danish CSOs for the 2022-2025. See more at www.um.dk/en

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AT THREE LEVELS

Global Focus takes a holistic approach to promote new ways of working with CSOs, using a three-level framework that includes the internal, activity, and systemic levels. This approach was also applied in the Deep Dive by considering experiences and viewpoints across all three levels, recognising that interventions are needed across levels to strengthen the operationalisation of nexus in organisations. Without a "nexus conducive framework" at the systemic level, there is a limit to how much progress can be made at the activity and organisational levels – and vice versa. Collaboration with donors is e.g., crucial, and changes at the systemic level can lead to new focus on nexus.

In the Danish context, collaboration between CSOs and the Danish MFA shows how changes occur at the systemic level through policies and recommendations. For example, the *DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*⁴ inspired the Danish MFA's nexus thinking, which was incorporated into the strategic partnership agreements signed with Danish CSOs for 2022-2025, e.g. by combining development and humanitarian funding streams into one. However, even if changes occur at the systemic level, these may not necessarily lead to subsequent changes in organisations. Therefore, it is crucial to actively strengthen the organisational and activity levels to ensure that policy promises translate into better programming being delivered on the ground.

THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

Organisational culture, internal systems, organisational structure, governance and leadership

DEEP DIVE DISCUSSION

Exploring the HDP nexus is a common challenge for Danish organisations due to their internal silo structure. While this structure may have resulted in a deepened professionalisation within each department, it has also led to differing levels of separation between humanitarian, development, and peace teams (for those that have them) as well as their support teams. This has resulted in a lack of coherence in understanding and implementing the nexus concept. It is worth noting that this silo structure reflects a wider systemic issue within the aid system.

4) <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-501>

ACTION COMING OUT OF THE DEEP DIVE

PlanBørnefonden (and several other organisations, in fact) found inspiration in the Deep Dive's session 4, which brought programmatic and administrative/finance staff together to discuss ways of enabling organisational structures to support nexus financing. As a result, they have been setting up and testing underlying systems and procedures in their 4-year Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Danish MFA to allow for more flexibility in programming allowing for a stronger HDP nexus approach. It was decided to form a cross-departmental Adaptive Management internal task force that included Grant Controllers, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research & Learning (MERL) colleagues and Programme Managers to establish a more informed and systematic approach to adapt the programmes.

PlanBørnefonden found it useful to refer to adaptability rather than "nexus" and concrete tools and indicators were co-developed by staff in Denmark and in country offices, forming the foundation for effectively working in an adaptive manner. The approach and tools are now being tested in two geographies.

"We insist on having the knowledge from relevant functions present, so that we can establish a joint culture and the necessary underlying structures for an adaptive approach to programming from the very outset of our interventions." – Helene Egebjerg, Team Lead at PlanBørnefonden

THE ACTIVITY LEVEL

Activities and approaches (projects, programmes, advocacy etc.) that is carried out by the organisation – often in collaboration with colleagues at national offices, local partners, and donors

DEEP DIVE DISCUSSION

To collaborate effectively on nexus practices, an organisation relies on both its internal and external systems and structures. Viewing the challenges faced by organisations through the multiple, interdependent levels highlights the crucial role of local leadership and complementarity. The aim is not for each organisation to do everything, but rather to coordinate and complement each other's efforts to achieve collective outcomes. However, what hindrances are obstructing the participating organisations from achieving this goal?

Concrete activities and programming – done by organisations alone and in consortia – were presented and discussed during the Deep Dive. Despite local leadership being among the top discussed themes, local actors do not experience their concrete context and the challenges they face as separated into three silos. Their reality is problems, needs, and challenges that are interconnected and complex. Strengthening the operationalisation of nexus also means increased local leadership and context-specific approaches.

ACTION COMING OUT OF THE DEEP DIVE

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has pointed out that the Deep Dive has played a pivotal role in enabling cross-organisational learning on the nexus (involving different teams). This has allowed staff members to participate in conversations with peers, leading to an enhanced comprehension of DRC's particular approach to the HDP nexus, including links to peacebuilding, and provided inspiration for concrete program activities.

Furthermore, DRC has used input from the Deep Dive to finalise (and publish) its *'Peace' in the Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding Nexus Learning and Practice Note* that is publicly available⁵.

Mission East found that despite the growing attention to the HDP nexus, there remains a lack of clarity, which impedes implementation and concrete action. However, the Deep Dive provided the organisation with insights to overcome this barrier, and a position paper is now being drafted that consolidates their understanding of the nexus. The paper will help to lay out Mission East's own specific position on the HDP Nexus and how that will help to guide future strategy and modality of implementation, especially in fragile contexts and protracted crises.

"The discussions have been very valuable in helping us to clarify our understanding of the HDP nexus and to incorporate diverse perspectives as we now develop and formalise our own approach. Mission East recognises that more needs to be done to bring local voices 'to the nexus table' and is working actively to make this happen and to bring local actor experiences to the fore." - Joohi Haleem – Programme Manager at Mission East

THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL

The financial and political systems that the organisation is navigating within, global trends etc.

DEEP DIVE DISCUSSION

During the sessions, there was active participation from the Danish MFA in discussing the system-level factors that govern HDP nexus work. These factors, which include procedures and frameworks, often do not align with local needs, and can create obstacles due to limited risk tolerance among donors and a lack of influence for local actors in the humanitarian infrastructure and coordination system. Examples were provided where local leadership efforts may inadvertently impose global systems on local organisations. The importance of multi-year, high-quality funding was emphasised as a critical component in addressing these challenges. However, it was acknowledged that even when adaptable funding is available, it may not always be distributed to local partners. Good collaboration between CSOs and the MFA is important. The CSOs (both Danish based and their partners) play a pivotal role in translating the policies and structures at the systemic level to concrete practice. The MFA needs to take into account the gained knowledge and experience by the CSOs into consideration when developing their systems at national level.

ACTION COMING OUT OF THE DEEP DIVE

The Danish MFA found the HDP Nexus Deep Dive as valuable for the ministry as it demonstrated the value of civil society's collective knowledge and experience with the HDP nexus. This led to the Nexus Working Group under Global Focus being invited to provide both written and oral inputs to the ministry's internal "how to note" on HDP nexus, a policy note widely used in the ministry. The note highlights Global Focus' work on nexus as an important learning platform for Danish civil society actors⁶.

The example illustrates the significance of collaboration between donors and CSOs. This collaboration can be achieved bilaterally, but it is increasingly being pursued through collective efforts, unified approaches, and shared platforms of knowledge and best practices.

5) Please refer to <https://pro.drc.ngo/resources/documents/peace-in-the-humanitarian-development-peacebuilding-nexus-learning-and-practice-note/>

6) Please refer to <https://amg.um.dk/policies-and-strategies/how-to-notes-for-implementation-of-the-danish-strategy-for-development-cooperation>

LEARNING STATEMENTS

The participating organisations identified a number of challenges and discussed possible solutions, leading to three main takeaways for operationalising the HDP nexus.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

1. Encouraging shared understanding and collaboration by breaking down internal silos within organisations. This entails bringing together development and humanitarian teams, as well as program and finance teams, to ensure coherence and complementarity between humanitarian, development, and peace efforts.
2. Addressing organisational systems, procedures, culture, and mindset that hinder the agility, flexibility, and adaptability required for operationalising the nexus. This applies to both the organisational and activity level.
3. Promoting local leadership by adopting flexible funding and long-term planning approaches.

As organisations encounter comparable difficulties, collaboration around mitigation strategies and solutions becomes vital.

While it is important to acknowledge the Danish organisations' self-reflection on the necessity of organisational change to improve nexus implementation (activity level), we must also recognise the need to focus on broader systemic issues. This includes empowering local partners and individuals affected by crises to participate in decision-making processes, enhancing communication with donors on risk sharing and adaptive programming, and advocating for quality funding. The importance of local leadership has been a topic of significant discussion. Enhancing local leadership and adopting context-specific approaches are essential to improve the operationalisation of nexus. However, building strong local leadership is not a spontaneous process. It requires considerable effort from organisations at the system, organisational, and activity levels to achieve this goal. Global Focus and members are intensifying this work in 2023.

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND THE ROAD AHEAD FOR GLOBAL FOCUS

The *operationalisation of the HDP nexus* presents several challenges and key issues that can be categorised into three levels. Firstly, organisations need to examine their methods of operating both as organisations and in their concrete programming activities. Secondly, although organisations are experiencing greater levels of professionalism, this may unintentionally hinder their ability to implement new objectives centred around adaptability, complementarity, localisation, and context-specific strategies in operations. Thirdly, the HDP nexus faces the dual challenge of tackling global systemic issues while also navigating the entanglement of these issues in the political system.

One of the primary objectives of the Deep Dive was to encourage members of the Global Focus to collectively enhance their comprehension of their organisational structure and programming's current "nexus-readiness." Various formats were utilised throughout the Deep Dive to ensure this and to encourage the operationalisation of HDP nexus. By involving colleagues from "support" functions to gain their endorsement and support on all three nexus areas and facilitating internal discussions through "sit-downs" to foster knowledge and idea-sharing, the Deep Dive was successful. For instance, the 'Nexus Financing' session had participation from the Head of Finance, Grant Officers, Danida focal points, Controllers, and Advocacy Officers, aiming to promote internal cross-organisational understanding and nexus thinking and practice ownership. Participants of the Deep Dive stated afterwards that the format of the Deep Dive, as well as the utilised tools (see annexes), enabled increased clarity and understanding within the organisation across department divisions (including country offices) and that the organisation saw their activities having a higher degree of nexus related thinking and practices incorporated than anticipated.

The participants found it relatively easier to pinpoint and discuss issues at the organisational and activity level than to devise solutions for systemic problems. This was an anticipated outcome. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the Danish MFA's engaged involvement provided a unique prospect for direct and constructive dialogue, leading to tangible outcomes. The fruitful discussions persisted even after the Deep Dive, as evident from the aforementioned MFA actions.

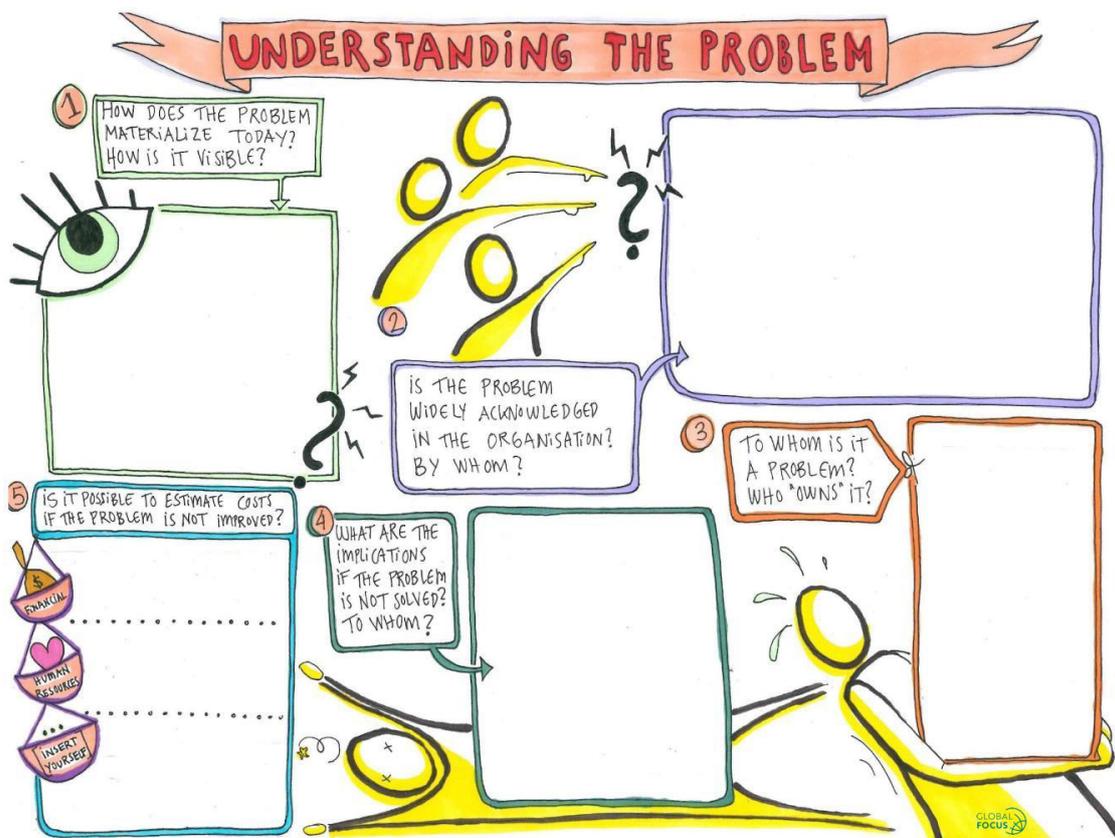
Global Focus has recognised the *three learning statements* discussed previously as a top priority for its initiatives. The Nexus Working Group will persist in its efforts, and Global Focus will partner with its members and global peers to share information and expand cooperation. The Deep Dive has strengthened Global Focus' work in taking active part in nexus related debates within and beyond civil society, both regionally and internationally. Since most challenges of implementing the Nexus are universal across organisations, Global Focus will endeavour to establish synergies with similar initiatives of its counterparts to avoid duplication.

Lastly, Global Focus will focus on *sharing concrete, good practices* from HDP nexus programs. The actions taken by organisations after the Deep Dive have demonstrated the importance of simplifying complex nexus concepts and translating them into practical organisational practices and realities. Therefore, this will be a key focus area going forward for Global Focus.

The intention of the Deep Dive was to initiate a dialogue and generate ideas, and this report is intended to inspire CSOs, peers of Global Focus, donors, and other stakeholders. Any questions related to the Deep Dive, the discussions and methodologies applied can be directed to Emma Byrne, Strategic Advisor, eb@globaltfokus.dk.

ANNEX: TOOLS APPLIED TO UNDERSTAND PROBLEMS, PROPOSE SOLUTIONS, AND PRIORITISE ACTION

Through the Deep Dive discussions, participants were able to explore issues and suggest pragmatic and feasible solutions. Given the importance of comprehending problems and devising effective solutions for organisational transformation, a visually engaging and user-friendly toolbox was developed to assist participants' thought processes. This versatile tool can be adapted to tackle a variety of other situations and challenges. It is included here as a source of inspiration.

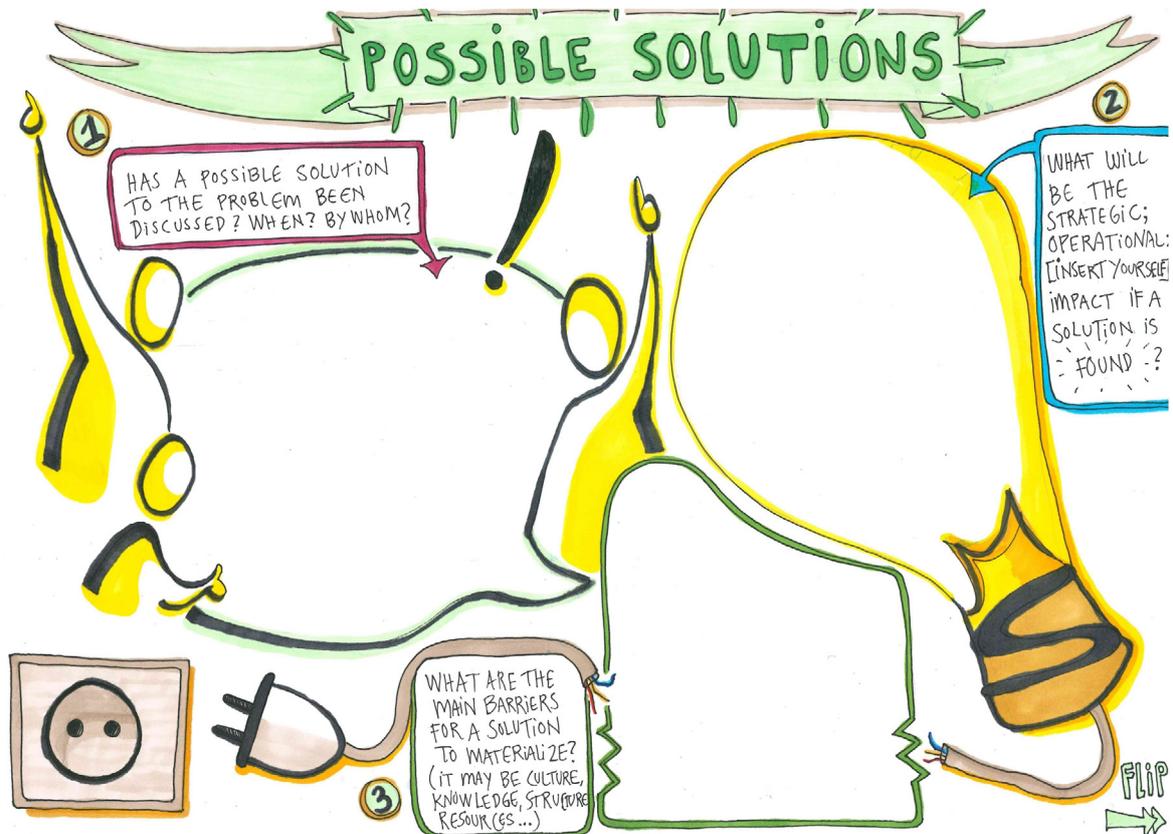


TOOL 1: UNDERSTANDING PROBLEMS

The tool emphasises five critical elements that are necessary for a comprehensive grasp of a problem. It acknowledges that if a problem is not fully understood, little change is likely to happen.

[DOWNLOAD PRINT VERSION⁷](#)

7) [https://globalfokus.dk/images/DeepDive/Illustration%20 HDP%20Nexus%20Understanding%20the%20Problem.jpg](https://globalfokus.dk/images/DeepDive/Illustration%20HDP%20Nexus%20Understanding%20the%20Problem.jpg)



TOOL 2: IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The tool aims to explore all possible angles of solutions, including identifying the relevant persons/departments, clearly formulating the impact of a solution, and gaining a deeper understanding of the barriers that may prevent a solution from materialising.

[DOWNLOAD PRINT VERSION⁸](#)

8) https://globaltfokus.dk/images/DeepDive/Illustration%20HDP%20Nexus_Possible%20Solutions.jpg

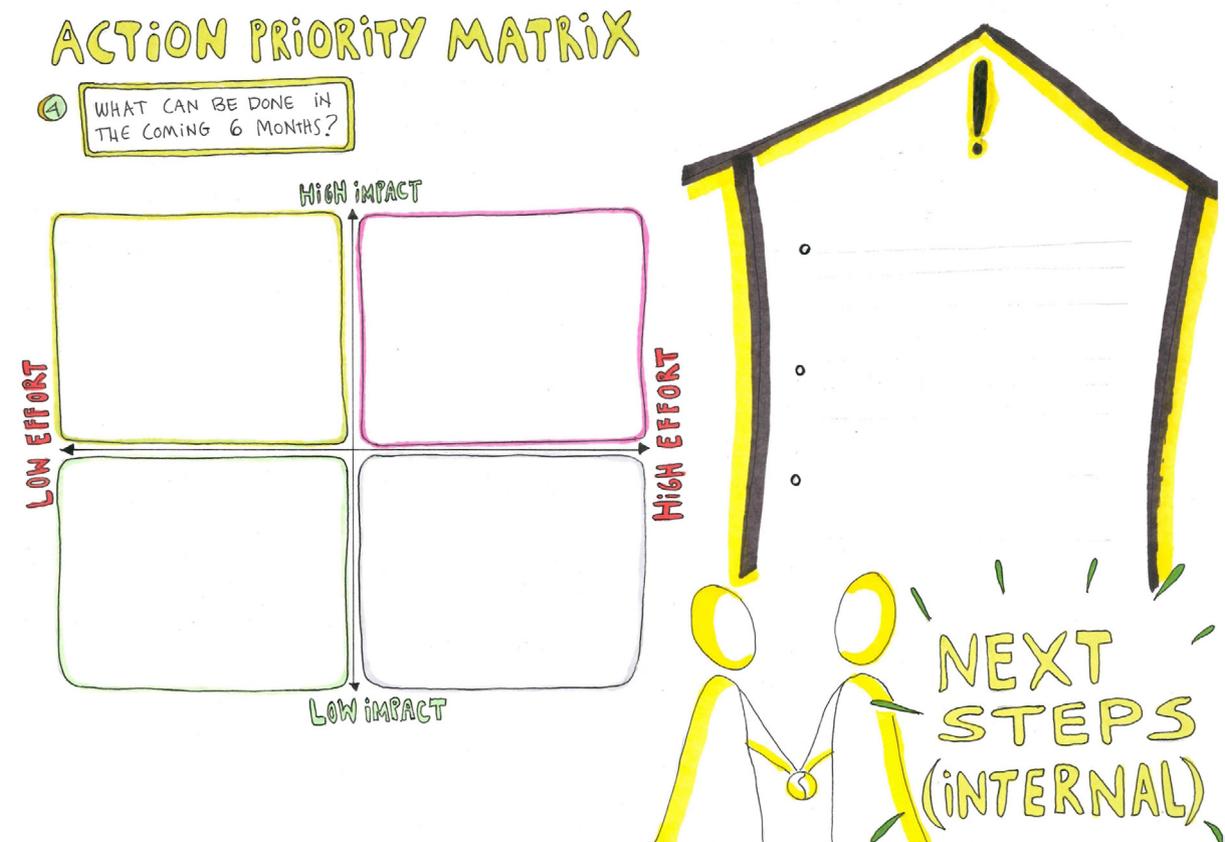
TOOL 3: PRIORITISING ACTION

Far too many projects fail. There are many reasons for this, including:

- 1) Poor project planning and management: Can include insufficient resources, unrealistic timelines, unclear objectives, inadequate communication, and lack of project oversight.
- 2) Scope creep: Occurs when the project's objectives or requirements keep expanding beyond the original plan. Can result in increased costs, delays, and lower quality work.
- 3) Inadequate team and stakeholder engagement: Can lead to misunderstandings, poor decision-making, and resistance to change, ultimately resulting in project failure.

It wasn't within the Deep Dive's mandate to create comprehensive Roadmaps or Action Plans for the involved organisations. A basic, operational matrix however was devised to concentrate on potential actions, which enabled the participants to initiate planning during the workshops.

[DOWNLOAD PRINT VERSION⁹](#)



⁹ https://globaltfokus.dk/images/DeepDive/Illustration%204_HDP%20Nexus_Actions%20Priority.jpg

DEEP DIVE



Credits

The Deep Dive and learning report were conducted together with consultant, Anders Bech Tharsgaard

Illustrations: Amanda Levi Marquardsen Souza

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