

# HDP Nexus and Conflict Sensitivity

Changing the Aid System for  
Good?

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# Imprint

HDP Nexus and Conflict Sensitivity: Changing the Aid System for Good?

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Puzzle on a wall, Askhan Forouzani (Unsplash).

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# Introduction

International aid actors have been facing an increasing temporal and geographic coexistence of humanitarian and development needs. They have also realized that especially in conflict-affected contexts sustainable development is not possible without an integrated approach that includes peace and security. To address these challenges, they have, over the last decades, developed a number of approaches aimed at making aid in conflict contexts more effective and responsive to the complexities of these contexts.

The Humanitarian Development Peace (HDP) or Triple nexus is one such approach and it is currently a hot topic in the international aid community. The HDP nexus seeks to provide a solution to improve aid effectiveness and work towards more sustainable peace and development. Praised by some, criticised by others, what the HDP nexus exactly is, and how it is to be operationalized, is, however, far from clear. Some see it as a policy-oriented framework focusing principally on structural and operational solutions such as improving coordination across the humanitarian, development and peace infrastructure and promoting new funding models. Others see it as a mindset, aiming at stimulating the thinking beyond one sector, thereby creating organic opportunities to improve international cooperation for the benefit of the affected population in the short-, mid- and long-term.

The HDP nexus as a mindset shares many aspects with another approach developed to improve aid in conflict-affected contexts: conflict sensitivity. Grown out of the Do No Harm approach, essentially, conflict sensitivity is a way of thinking and a well-established approach to ensure that interventions avoid doing harm to their implementation contexts and instead tap into their peacebuilding potentials.<sup>1</sup>

With this Essential, we make a critical contribution to the discussions on how to make aid in conflict contexts more effective, focusing on the HDP nexus. We show that the HDP nexus and conflict sensitivity not only have similar underlying objectives, but also include some of the core practical aspects needed to improve aid in conflict contexts. Even more so, they can strengthen one another. The overarching precondition for this is, however, that they are adopted as mindsets and aid actors

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1 Apart from the HDP nexus and conflict sensitivity, there are many other approaches that emerged with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of international cooperation. "[Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development \(LRRD\)](#)", an approach from the 1980s and taken up by the European Commission in 1996 stating that humanitarian assistance should not only address immediate needs, but also contribute to future resilience and long-term development benefits and risk management, is one example. The United Nations' "[New Way of Working](#)" of 2016, calling for "collective outcomes" and increased collaboration between development and humanitarian actors, based on their respective comparative advantage, is another.

genuinely aim to change the aid system through them. To develop our argument, we draw on swisspeace' experience of the last few years, when engaging in discussions and providing expert support in and around more effective aid in conflict contexts.

We first provide an overview of the origin, strengths and weaknesses of conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus. Then, we elaborate some core aspects, on which the two approaches overlap and reinforce each other. Based on the understanding that these two approaches are similar in many ways, we conclude by asking critical questions about why the international aid system is still waiting for this change to happen and what this tells us for the way forward.

# 1 Conflict Sensitivity

Growing out of the “Do No Harm” approach almost three decades ago<sup>2</sup> and developed further since, conflict sensitivity is widely acknowledged in the international community as one of the most important cross-cutting approaches in international cooperation – be it in the development, humanitarian or peacebuilding sector.<sup>3</sup>

At the core of conflict sensitivity lies the recognition that international assistance is never implemented in isolation from the receiving context, and that diverse interactions take place. These interactions usually consist of material or immaterial resource transfers, or of explicit or implicit messages and signals. They – consciously or unconsciously – influence the context of implementation by changing the available amount and distribution of public goods, shifting power relations and affecting people’s attitudes and perspectives.

While this is not negative per se, it becomes particularly delicate in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Many contexts in which humanitarian, development and/or peacebuilding work takes place suffer from conflicts that pose obstacles to sustainable development and peace and contribute to humanitarian crises. If aid actors do not actively take existing and potential conflicts into account, they risk fuelling or escalating these conflicts. Furthermore, such contexts are usually very dynamic, complex and thus often unpredictable in their development. If changes in the context are not captured, international cooperation risks becoming ineffective and unable to respond appropriately to context-specific needs. Yet, international aid often has the potential to strengthen social cohesion and peace through their interventions – a potential that is all too often left under-exploited.

Conflict sensitivity is recognized for addressing those challenges by transforming the mindset of international actors and the way of looking at the specificities of a context. It takes the implementing context as a starting point and aims at responding to context-specific needs, be they humanitarian, development or peacebuilding needs, with the underlying awareness that there are (potentially violent) conflicts in every context that can be affected by the resources inserted to that context. If applied to the full extent, this approach transcends the different levels of an organization, from the strategic and management commitment

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2 The pivotal event initiating a deep reflection within the international aid community was the Rwandan genocide in 1994, where humanitarian aid in refugee camps was exploited by Hutu militias to consolidate their power and launch attacks, implying that the international community indirectly contributed to the conflict.

3 In the “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States” of 2011, for example, 44 countries and international organizations committed to more context-sensitive and country-led approaches to international cooperation.

to programmatic and operational instruments and tools to personal attitudes and behavior of individual staff members.

An abundance of guidelines and tools has been developed to implement conflict sensitivity in practice.<sup>4</sup> These tools are useful because they provide organizations with guidance on how to operationalize conflict sensitivity in practice and on what structures and policies to adopt how in view of institutionalizing the approach. At the same time, we notice that conflict sensitivity is implemented in a rather minimalist way. There seems to be a lack of full institutionalization of conflict sensitivity throughout the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. While some progress has been made at the structural and organizational levels (e.g. hiring conflict advisors in international organizations or developing organization-specific conflict sensitivity strategies), the change in relationships, distribution of decision-making power and authority needed for the international aid system to become truly conflict-sensitive is not happening as much. For example, for humanitarian, development and peace interventions to be conflict-sensitive and context relevant in the long term, ownership and decision-making power over these interventions need be transferred to national and local actors. This can be done by strengthening local organizations in their institutional, programmatic and administrative capacities. In reality, far too often the international organization is the accountable contract holder and hence in a decision-making position via-à-vis international donors. All the while the local organization remains the “implementing partner” whose responsibility is limited implementing projects without any decision-making power. Furthermore, conflict sensitivity is ideally not only implemented at the project level, but throughout the aid system: from donor headquarters and field offices to international and national organizations, and from programming teams to finance

### Observation 1

Many organizations we work with recognize the importance of conflict sensitivity. However, when it comes to reacting to challenges and obstacles, and dealing with necessary adjustments, they often struggle with limited flexibility on the donor side or fear of putting their donor relations at risk by asking for adaptations.

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4 The first explicit definition of conflict sensitivity as we know it today as well as a collection of different tools was presented in International Alert et al. (2004) [Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: a resource Pack](#). London: International Alert.

## Observation 2

We have observed many organizations choosing the “path of least resistance” to implement conflict sensitivity by, for example, foster conflict sensitivity capacities of staff members. If not accompanied by a change in strategic management priorities, follow-up and flexible resources to integrate conflict sensitivity effectively, these trainings are nothing more than lip service.

and procurement up to management. If this is not done, the potential of conflict sensitivity is limited (see observation 1 and 2). Finally, to be sustainable, a change towards conflict-sensitive aid must also include a change in the attitudes and mindsets of every actor involved in the system. Without this shift, conflict sensitivity risks being just another approach, lip service that organizations only perform for reporting purposes. Conflict sensitivity as a mindset – the only way of truly addressing the challenges of international cooperation and contributing to more effective aid in conflict-affected contexts in our view – has not been fully implemented yet.<sup>5</sup>

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5 See e.g. Barbolet et al. (2005): [The utility and dilemmas of conflict sensitivity](#). Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management; Goldwyn, R. (2014): [Conflict Sensitivity Integration Review](#). Review done for USAID; Paffenholz, T. (2016): Conflict Sensitivity – 20 years of practice: a Critical reflection. In: Handschin, S. et al. (eds.) (2016): [Conflict Sensitivity: Taking it to the Next Level](#). swisspeace working paper 2/2016.



## 2 HDP Nexus

Although not fully implemented in practice, the understanding of conflict sensitivity seems to be clear amongst the vast majority of actors working in international cooperation. The HDP nexus, in contrast, is a highly debated concept that is mainly discussed among actors of the Global North and that does not have a clear definition yet.

Like the concept of Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity, the HDP nexus sprung from the understanding that international cooperation today, while being faced with increasing pressure on budgets, is often not able to effectively respond to challenges in a given context. Many contexts suffer from protracted crises, which are multidimensional and naturally not separated into humanitarian, development and conflict crises. The “siloes” humanitarian, development and peacebuilding needs, which international cooperation is addressing through strictly separated mechanisms and in a sequential manner, do not exist on the ground. They are entirely artificial. In reality, interrelated challenges reinforce each other and can only be addressed effectively with a multidimensional, holistic response.

The opinions of how to do so, however, differ. As outlined in the introduction, one interpretation revolves around a policy-oriented approach to implementing the HDP nexus. According to this approach, the changes needed are primarily programmatic, such as providing additional funding for cross-silo programming, creating common objectives and joined-up programmes. The OECD DAC recommendations on the HDP nexus aiming to “support, incentivize and implement more collaborative, coherent and complementary humanitarian, development and peace actions, [...]” is one important guiding document reflecting this discussion.<sup>6</sup> While we recognize the significance of clear guidance and tools to implement approaches including the HDP nexus, we indeed also realize that a purely policy- and operations-oriented discussion risks missing the goal of actually changing the international community’s approach to international cooperation (see observation 3). This way, the HDP nexus is just another tool that aid actors use without actually changing their underlying mindsets, adding to the collection of already existing tools that are well-intended but not implemented meaningfully.

### Observation 3

In our experience, the HDP nexus is initially often framed as a new project type by donors and implementing actors. However, only the narrative changes while the actual content of the projects remains the same.

Therefore, we argue that similar to conflict sensitivity, the HDP nexus first and foremost is a mindset. It is a way of thinking and looking at ourselves and a specific context, with the aim of gearing international cooperation towards local needs. Rather than thinking and working in pre-defined thematic silos to address one specific type of need, locally identified needs themselves should be the starting point to any intervention. The result is a bottom-up, people-centered approach to international cooperation. Context-specific needs are identified through meaningful engagement with communities and a transfer of power from international to national and local organizations. Against this background, the HDP nexus does not imply that different actors all need to start working across the three sectors; it means, however, that each actor perceives itself as part of a larger system, contributing to similar long-term visions and goals and addressing underlying causes of multidimensional problems rather than merely treating their symptoms. Actors belonging to different sectors have different perspectives on a context and different ways to respond to it, some short-term, some more long-term. Having an HDP nexus mindset would mean to share these perspectives, exchange analyses and use synergies. As a result, actors would come to a joint understanding of a context and be able to address multidimensional problems in an integrated way. They would mutually reinforce each other. Differences between the sectors would end up being neither normative nor hierarchical, but purely technical.<sup>7</sup> This also implies that the HDP nexus can take different forms – it can be implemented in the form of increased, formalized or ad hoc coordination between different actors, but also through fully fledged HDP nexus projects combining different aspects in one initiative.

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7 See, e.g., [Du Bois 2020](#).

# 3 Overlaps and Synergies

The previous two sections have shown that both conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus are based on a similar understanding of existing challenges and needs resulting from the – often unsatisfactory – way in which international aid is currently delivered.

Looking more closely at how aid is being delivered in very practical terms, it becomes apparent that both approaches are able to contribute to more effective, context- and complexity-oriented aid in conflict-affected contexts, if they are implemented as bottom-up mindsets aiming at a more fundamental change in power dynamics in the aid system. In fact, looking at these aspects shows that the two approaches overlap quite strongly and even have the potential to reinforce each other. The following section zooms in on several of these aspects.

## CONTEXT AS THE STARTING POINT

Conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus both recognize that a good part of the international aid system tends to be detached from local contexts and therefore lacks essential insights to respond to multidimensional problems in an effective way. Both approaches thus emphasize the need to focus more on the specific context and local needs, seeing a thorough understanding of the local (conflict) context as the starting point to any intervention. While conflict sensitivity considerations can ensure that information on contexts and local needs is collected in a sensitive way, a nexus mindset can lead to the creation of synergies that make the endeavor of collecting and analyzing context-specific information more resource-efficient (see observation 4).

### Observation 4

Humanitarian actors often put forward their lack of time and resources to take into account context specificities in emergency situations. Working with a nexus mindset implies the use of synergies through which humanitarian actors can refer to other organizations' analyses and resources to adjust their crisis interventions as much as possible to the (conflict) context.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Taking context as the starting point for any intervention is closely linked to meaningfully engaging with local communities and stakeholders, a central tenet of both conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus. Engaging and exchanging with communities is necessary to identify and appropriately respond to local needs, the basis of an HDP nexus mindset. Engagement with local communities is also essential to ensure downward accountability and necessary to create ownership among local actors in any external intervention. Any intervention that is not rooted in exchange with and inclusion of local structures and communities risks being top-down. Else, the intervention is unable to capture its (negative and positive) side-effects on local conflict dynamics and ultimately ends up being conflict-insensitive. Conflict sensitivity considerations can provide useful guidance on how community engagement can be done in a way that does not cause harm. This includes reflecting on who the communities are, which community representatives are involved and in what way, how an inclusive and participatory understanding of community needs can be developed, and how a sustainable partnership with communities can be established. A nexus mindset, on the other hand, can further strengthen a conflict-sensitive community engagement: When different actors collaborate, share their – at times longstanding – experience and exchange information before engaging with communities, rather than each actor reaching out individually, structures can be kept lean and the burden on communities can be minimized.

## TRANSFER OF POWER TO THE LOCAL LEVEL

The transfer of power is another core principle of both conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus if interpreted as a mindset. Transferring power to national and local actors, letting them identify context-specific needs and plan and implement relevant programs across different sectors in a participatory and inclusive way has the potential to contribute to context and conflict-sensitive interventions. It requires that the power transfer itself takes place in a conflict-sensitive way and that national and local actors themselves act in a conflict-sensitive manner. If local realities and needs should be the starting point of any intervention, local leadership needs to be inherent to conducting international cooperation with a nexus mindset. Furthermore, our experience shows that many local organizations would usually work across the HDP nexus anyway, as their natural approach is to support their communities to address whatever needs they face, no matter which sector they could be assigned to (see observation 5).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On the example of South Sudan, see [here](#).

## Observation 5

Our experience from South Sudan shows that local organizations usually work along the HDP nexus, as they aim to respond to the needs of communities in the best way possible. Rather than making them comply with new regulations along “new” HDP nexus programming, international actors would do better in transferring decision-making power to these actors and taking their experiences as a starting point when responding to dynamic needs.

## ADAPTABILITY

For both the HDP nexus and conflict sensitivity to be implemented effectively, a focus on flexibility and capability to adapt to changes in the context is indispensable. Adaptation may become necessary because such context changes cause a shift in the local population's needs, which is relevant for the HDP nexus. To remain conflict-sensitive, a modification in conflict dynamics also requires flexibility in terms of response. To be able to adapt effectively, flexible approaches need to transcend the different areas of the aid sector. Specifically, this also includes budgeting and the provision of funds at the donor level. Donors need to start “walking the talk” and provide more leeway for implementing actors to spend funds according to locally identified and sometimes quickly changing needs. Ideally, this goes hand in hand with a transfer of decision-making power to local organizations and more trust in their capabilities to use funds flexibly where they are needed most. Again, conflict sensitivity considerations can make a contribution to adaptation that is mindful of potential harm it may create. This includes, for example, considerations about who benefits and who misses out in case of a dynamic shift of funds (see observation 6).

## Observation 6

In an HDP nexus project implemented by a consortium of different NGOs, shifting the budget from development to humanitarian activities, for example, implies that the development organization give up some of its funding, which could put the organization itself at risk. Adaptation within a nexus project thus needs to be carefully thought through and done in a conflict-sensitive way.

## COORDINATION, COOPERATION, COLLABORATION

One aspect that should follow naturally from the nexus mindset is an increased interaction with other actors and the creation of synergies. The HDP nexus mindset ideally leads to more explicit exchange, which can take the form of coordination, cooperation, or collaboration, between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors. Sharing information, producing joint (conflict) context analyses, establishing joined-up plans and utilizing the synergies of individual mandates and capacities that can strengthen each other, are key to a holistic picture of a context and effective multi-dimensional response to it. “Breaking the silos” also strengthens conflict sensitivity, particularly because it helps development and humanitarian actors to identify entry points for social cohesion and peace. In fact, original guiding documents<sup>9</sup> as well as more recent publications on conflict sensitivity<sup>10</sup> ask organizations to look at the bigger picture, consider strengthening complementarity with other actors, including actors from other sectors, and avoid undermining other actors’ efforts due to a lacking understanding of the conflict context. This aspect of coordination and complementarity is often overlooked in the rather minimalist way conflict sensitivity is applied today.

## CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

Aid actors in many contexts have been realizing that it is not possible to move beyond a humanitarian response and work towards sustainable development without addressing conflict, especially given the interrelated challenges many fragile contexts face today. Conflict is intricately linked to humanitarian crises and often poses an obstacle to development. This calls for conflict sensitivity as well as enhanced collaboration across sectors meaning an HDP nexus.

While humanitarian and development actors have been collaborating for some time now, bringing in the peace element presents a particular challenge. It relates to concerns about being perceived too political or undermining existing working principles when engaging with “peace” too closely, but also to very different understandings of what peace is. Even if humanitarian and development actors are aware of conflict dynamics in their implementation contexts, they often lack the necessary resources and skills to effectively respond to these dynamics. Conflict sensitivity offers an entry point to actors aiming to take on a nexus mindset, as it asks everyone to be aware of the conflict context and consider potential contributions they could make to peace. If aid actors manage to get away from the idea that the HDP nexus means

9 See, e.g. the [Resource Pack](#).

10 See, e.g. Gabriel, S. (2016): *Breaking the Silos: Conflict Sensitivity as an Opportunity to Overcome Silo-Thinking*. In: Handschin, S. et al. (eds.) (2016): [Conflict Sensitivity: Taking it to the Next Level](#). swisspeace working paper 2/2016

public and formalized collaboration with peacebuilding and maybe even security actors but instead realize that the term “peace” is extremely broad, ranging from conflict prevention, peacebuilding and reconciliation programs to indirectly related programs on education, empowerment of marginalized groups, social cohesion or economic opportunities, the peace element can become more tangible. What is more, a greater exchange between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors along the nexus mindset provides opportunities for the former two to benefit from the latter’s shared knowledge and experience regarding responses to conflict dynamics in a given context.

## 4 A New Mindset

Conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus address the same underlying concerns about international cooperation. As shown above, they also have commonalities, overlaps and synergies in very practical terms. This suggests that the two approaches, if integrated meaningfully into the aid architecture as mindsets, are able to make international cooperation more effective on multiple levels. If applied to the full extent, conflict sensitivity can serve as an entry point to operationalize a nexus mindset, because it sensitizes actors about the fact that social cohesion and peace cannot be neglected, but need to be part of the picture. At the same time, the HDP nexus thinking encourages actors to not only focus on themselves, but to engage and exchange more with other actors, including from other sectors. Adopting the nexus mindset challenges the international community to break the limits it has so far imposed on itself and encourages everyone to implement the full scope of conflict sensitivity. Hence, both approaches are able to make a meaningful contribution towards more effective, context- and complexity-oriented aid in conflict-affected contexts.

Conflict sensitivity and the HDP nexus are valid and useful concepts if they are applied comprehensively and aimed at a change in attitudes and mental models. As mentioned above, however, they are not the only initiatives calling for more effective international cooperation. In fact, they can be placed in a series of discussions around what remain to be the same problems and line up with a variety of concepts evolving around the same topic. Why, then, we ask, does the international community come up with a new concept to change the aid industry every few years? Especially since the underlying challenges have been well-known for decades and measures to address them have been suggested for a long time. When applied in its full form, conflict sensitivity, an approach with almost three decades of history under its belt, tackles most of the issues the HDP nexus seeks to address. The above comparison of core aspects to both approaches clearly exemplified this. It begs the question why we are unable to properly implement conflict sensitivity instead of a slightly adjusted approach, such as the HDP nexus, that seeks the same underlying change towards more effective aid in conflict. Looking at the history of the aid system, the HDP nexus can be expected to soon be replaced by a similar yet slightly different concept.

The answer to these questions lies in the inertia of the international aid system. As long as calls to reform the system only result in changing organizational practice, developing guidelines and tools and conducting trainings with project teams, any satisfactory results



are unlikely. For the whole system to change in a meaningful way, we desperately need a shift in power dynamics and accountability systems towards more real ownership and decision-making power at the local level, as well as a change in attitudes and mindsets of all actors involved in the system. The labels we use to achieve this change is secondary – what matters is that we are committed to critically reflect and adapt.

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