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How can development actors meet longer term needs in crises?

Framing country-based research on how actors can meet livelihood, recovery and development needs of vulnerable people during crises such as Covid-19

briefing

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Overview

This paper provides a framework for three country research reports that examine the role of development actors in crises in Cameroon, Somalia and Bangladesh (forthcoming).

It sets out the key evidence gaps we aim to fill on the ways in which development actors are supporting longer term livelihoods, recovery and development of crisis-affected populations, which includes a focus on the national response to Covid-19. Our research considers six core themes:

1. Crisis context
2. Strategy and partnerships
3. Coordination, prioritisation and planning
4. Programming approaches
5. Financing tools
6. Organisational issues

Building this evidence base will help inform national and global development policy and decision-making and support effective programming approaches to address the longer term needs of crisis-affected populations.

These outputs will culminate in a synthesis report (forthcoming), bringing together key learnings from the different contexts and drawing out key recommendations.

Background

Current trends indicate the link between poverty, vulnerability and crises is likely to strengthen in the future. By 2030, a larger proportion of the world's poorest people are set to reside in fragile and protracted crisis contexts. Crises are becoming increasingly protracted and complex in nature, with humanitarian assistance often going to the same countries year-on-year. This trend has led to consensus among policymakers on the need for joined-up humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) responses to address people's immediate and longer term development needs in recurrent and protracted crises. This will strengthen aid effectiveness and deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ in fragile and crisis (specifically disaster, displacement and conflict) contexts. This is especially relevant in protracted crises where HDP actors often overlap and engage with the very same communities.

The recommendation on the HDP nexus from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)² promotes a shift towards 'development where possible and humanitarian only when necessary'. Working 'at the nexus' to make these connections is not an end in itself but a means to addressing and reducing people's unmet needs, risks and vulnerabilities, increasing their resilience, addressing the root causes of conflict and building peace. This is highly pertinent in responding to Covid-19, which involves both immediate lifesaving assistance and longer term support for national health and social protection systems, and basic services. It also requires addressing peacebuilding challenges where the impacts of Covid-19 are exacerbating conflict.³

Development actors have a clear role to play in recurring and protracted crises. This includes investments in resilience, preparedness and peacebuilding – before, after or in parallel to a humanitarian response during an active crisis – to lay the foundations for recovery. There has already been a scale-up by major development actors, such as the World Bank, in resources targeting fragile and crisis-affected contexts over recent years. The greater, more concerted involvement of development actors brings with it the potential for additional resources to target the broader response to crisis, which is particularly important given the consistent strain on limited humanitarian resources.

However, development actors face some key structural and systemic blockages that hinder efforts to prioritise support to the most vulnerable people. Development actors primarily work through national government institutions. This presents them with a conundrum: how to balance financing to central governments in support of reforms, while at the same time addressing gaps in service delivery by directly targeting crisis-affected populations through or outside of partnerships with central and local/regional governments. Service delivery to populations experiencing crises should not be the sole responsibility of humanitarian actors; for a durable and sustainable approach, development actors also have a key role to play. It is vital that development partners balance their focus on structural and economic reforms at the central government level

with support to the longer term livelihood, recovery and development needs of crisis-affected populations. This can be achieved through partnerships with local government or non-governmental actors where government structures are not present or functioning.

Our research

As part of Development Initiatives (DI)'s programme of work on the nexus, 2019 research on donor approaches⁴ identified an evidence gap in the ways development actors address (and can better address) the longer term development needs of vulnerable populations in crisis settings and the structural causes of crisis. This evidence gap was corroborated in the research of others, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).⁵

DI, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)⁶ and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)⁷ and under the umbrella of IASC Results Group 5, is undertaking a series of country studies that seek to fill this evidence gap and include a focus on the national response to Covid-19. Research from Cameroon, Bangladesh and Somalia are due for publication over the coming months. A synthesis report will also be published to bring together learning, examples of existing and emerging good practice from across the country studies, and recommendations for how policy and practice could be improved. This research is undertaken within a framework that draws upon evidence captured in DI's earlier research on the nexus. Below we set out six core research themes and the key questions that we are exploring within these themes in each of the country case studies.

Crisis context

What are the key drivers of crises and to what extent are development actors addressing these?

Identifying the causes of different types of crises in a particular country, who is impacted, timeframes and geographical scales will help to build understanding of how development actors can support the livelihoods of crisis-affected populations, and the challenges faced. We explore these factors to identify key entry points and opportunities for development actors, the extent and nature of current engagement in crisis contexts, and the necessary strategic approach to each crisis.

What is the broader financing landscape?

Understanding the financing landscape is vital. The research provides a picture of the key donors, implementing agencies, sectors, funding channels and financing mechanisms in place, identifying best practice, lessons and gaps in how financing can better target vulnerable people. It assesses the composition of official development assistance (ODA) as humanitarian and development assistance, and how this has changed over time, signalling the extent to which development partners are shifting towards longer term approaches.

Strategy and partnerships

A key part of how development actors strategically engage in a crisis context is determined by who they partner with and whether (and the ways in which) they prioritise the livelihood and recovery needs of crisis-affected populations.

How do development actors work with governments and how does this impact their ability to support livelihoods, recovery and development in crises?

Development actors work in close partnership with governments to support structural and economic reforms (such as public financial management) in line with national priorities and the establishment of systems as necessary for providing core service delivery functions (e.g. health, education, sanitation and social protection). While working primarily with central governments may be possible in more stable contexts, this is often a challenge or impossible in crisis contexts. Financial management and governance systems may not be in place; a government may be party to a crisis or have political incentives to block development engagement in crisis-affected regions (e.g. in supporting longer term livelihood support to refugees); there may be limited geographical reach to vulnerable populations; or a central government may lack the capacity to lead.

This research explores how development actors work with governments in crisis-affected countries, especially regarding support at the policy level, in resource allocation and service delivery in targeting crisis-affected populations. This will help to identify emerging practices, key lessons and opportunities for overcoming barriers.

How do development actors work with non-governmental partners and how does this impact their ability to support livelihoods, recovery and development in crises?

Where it is not possible to work with government institutions for the reasons outlined above, supporting service delivery through local authorities, UN agencies and NGOs as an alternative to central government is often used as a necessary option for reaching crisis-affected populations. This research captures the ways development actors partner with NGOs and UN agencies and the impact this has on their ability to support crisis-affected populations. It also captures innovative approaches to partnerships. For example, in severely crisis-affected contexts where only humanitarian structures are present, an emerging trend is for development actors to deliver services (e.g. safety nets) through humanitarian actors until the capacities of local and central governments have been built to a level that enables them to lead. This breaks down HDP silos.

DI's previous research on donor approaches to the nexus highlighted that selecting partners on the basis of their comparative advantage to respond quickly to a changing context, to have access to vulnerable populations, and be able to support livelihoods (as opposed to those that are established or easier to fund through the aid system) is key. This research explores the extent that partners are selected on this basis, including

overcoming barriers to funding local and national actors, which is especially relevant in the context of Covid-19. It also examines how and to what extent development actors are (or are open to) working flexibly and collaboratively with humanitarian and peace actors in crisis-affected areas, and how this collaborative working is embedded into partnership agreements and reviews. This research captures lessons for development actors on effective partnerships in crises.

Coordination, prioritisation and planning

What role do coordination mechanisms in-country play in supporting joined-up HDP assessments, planning and delivery in crisis-affected areas?

Building synergies between in-country HDP actors through coordination mechanisms is crucial for effective responses in crisis-affected regions, identifying a division of responsibilities between key actors at different stages of crisis, and providing the foundation for joined-up and complementary planning and programming. Strong coordination is also key for an effective Covid-19 response. This research assesses existing coordination mechanisms for bringing HDP actors together at national and local levels: how effective they are and what factors determine their effectiveness, such as the role of government and national development financing frameworks.

How are development actors working within and between agencies on joined-up assessments and planning and to identify shared outcomes?

DI's previous research on the nexus highlighted that joined-up assessments and planning by HDP actors, within and between agencies, is a prerequisite for working effectively in crisis-affected communities and identifying the comparative advantage of development actors. Where joined-up assessments are not appropriate (e.g. for safeguarding humanitarian principles), creating ways to systematically connect separate analyses and develop complementarity is key, especially where HDP actors are targeting the very same communities. For greater accountability, a key aspect of this is identifying shared outcome-level indicators for HDP actors in supporting the resilience, recovery and livelihoods of crisis-affected populations.

This research assesses the extent to which development actors work collaboratively internally and externally with each other and with humanitarian and peace actors to undertake shared analysis and planning. It also looks at whether internal planning processes require staff to demonstrate how collaboration has been achieved and if the longer term development needs of crisis-affected populations have been considered. It assesses whether there have been efforts in-country to capture and share learnings on outcome-level indicators that have proved appropriate in practice and could be adopted elsewhere.

Programming approaches

How are development actors embedding risk and flexibility into the programme cycle?

For development actors to effectively work in fast-changing crisis contexts, they need to have systems in place that allow them to adapt and flex priorities during the programme cycle. This includes establishing systems for regularly updating assessments, embedding risk and scenario modelling into planning processes, and ensuring that results frameworks can be adapted as priorities shift. Flexible funding is also a key part of this (see section on financing, below). This research assesses the systems in place to enable flexibility in the approaches of development actors in crises, where the blockages to this are and how they can be addressed.

What programming approaches are used by development actors in crisis-affected areas?

DI's earlier research on the nexus found that programming with an explicit focus on building collaboration, coherence and complementarity between HDP actors is implemented in pockets at the country level and is not generally systematised or taking place at scale. Effective development programming targeting crisis-affected populations was found to include efforts to support livelihoods and lay the foundation for long-term development and recovery during a crisis, support shock responsive, early action and preventative responses to crisis, and systematically embed risk, resilience and peacebuilding. Given that the peace component of the triple nexus is the least developed or understood, the research will capture learning and best practice regarding the integration of peacebuilding into development approaches.

The research assesses the programming approaches of development actors targeting crisis-affected populations, including in response to Covid-19. In particular, it assesses whether development actors have mainstreamed efforts to embed risk, build resilience and peace, and support recovery. It also looks at the impact that different programming models have in supporting preparedness, preventative action and durable solutions. It assesses whether systems are in place to document and share learning on effective development programming in crisis contexts as necessary for strengthening guidance, systematising approaches and supporting scale-up.

Financing tools

How are development actors using flexible financing approaches and how have these enabled development actors to support crisis-affected populations?

DI's previous research demonstrated that a high degree of flexibility enabling development actors to adapt existing priorities (by reallocating budgets) or scale-up to support new partners and crisis-affected populations (by accessing unearmarked, contingency/pooled or in-built programmatic risk funding) is crucial for working effectively in fast-changing contexts. This is made easier where country budgets are not demarcated between humanitarian and development priorities; where they are separate (as is often the case), complementarity in planning and budgeting of HDP priorities is vital. Flexibility is a real challenge for development actors as it requires a level of risk, timely disbursement of funds, decentralised decision-making and flexible results frameworks, all of which are not generally standard practice. The call for financing for anticipatory and preventative action is well established, although it only happens on a small (project-level) scale and faces numerous technical and political challenges.

This research assesses the level of flexibility development actors and partners have at the country level in terms of budget allocation/reallocation (and any thresholds in place), contingency financing mechanisms and the speed of accessing such funding, and levels of complementarity or integration of humanitarian and development budgets. This will help to generate learning on how heavy bureaucratic funding processes can be addressed and streamlined to enable greater flexibility and responsiveness.

What development funding mechanisms are used and how do they impact the ability of development actors to support crisis-affected populations?

Funding through global financing mechanisms can play a key role in supporting and scaling up the direct engagement of development actors in crisis-affected areas to support livelihoods (e.g. those of the World Bank, EU and regional donor funds). This is especially important given the global commitment to work on the nexus and on resilience, preparedness and a shift to development approaches in protracted and recurring crises. However, such funds are not always sustainable given the competition between countries to access funds, nor are they aligned to local needs as set out in national financing mechanisms. Bilateral aid programmes, technical assistance frameworks and national trust funds must also play a role here to ensure the scale of development funding targeting vulnerable crisis-affected populations is adequate, and for greater sustainability.

This research assesses what national or global financing mechanisms are in operation in each country and how effective they are at enabling development actors to address longer term livelihood needs during a crisis and support resilience, recovery and peacebuilding – directly through programming and indirectly through policy reforms and central resource allocation.

Organisational issues

What decision-making structures are in place and how do they affect the ability of development actors to respond to the needs of crisis-affected populations?

DI's previous research demonstrated that decentralised organisational and decision-making structures, especially regarding budget allocation/reallocation with technical support and guidance from the centre, is preferable for enabling donors to respond flexibly to changing crisis contexts. This research assesses existing organisation decision-making structures and how they impact development actors' ability to flex and adapt in a timely manner in response to the needs of vulnerable populations.

What staffing models and skills are in place and how do they affect the ability of development actors to respond to needs in crisis-affected populations?

It is necessary that in-country staff working under the label of 'development' have the appropriate mix of expertise which includes risk, resilience, recovery and peacebuilding. Where it is not an option to deploy a large multidisciplinary team, ensuring that existing staff have skills and knowledge on these areas is crucial, as is integrating these expectations into performance management systems. DI's previous research found that in-country staffing models with overlapping priorities of HDP staff help to strengthen collaboration and breakdown silos. This research assesses whether the appropriate mix of staff skills, models and technical support from the centre are in place to support staff to address the longer term recovery livelihoods of crisis-affected people.

What operational guidance is in place and how does this support the engagement of development actors in crises?

DI's previous research on the nexus demonstrated that the strategy underpinning development actors' engagement in crises should be driven primarily by the context, with support and guidance from the centre. While central donor policy and strategy can provide direction and help to systematise approaches, it is vital that this is not an imposed top-down blueprint but allows for the flexibility needed when working in fast-changing contexts. The domestic political considerations of donors also play a key role in influencing the strategic direction of donors and partners in-country. This research assesses the extent that country and regional strategies are driven by the context, national politics of donors and/or global/institutional policies and requirements. It uses this to identify existing blockages and opportunities for the strategy guiding development engagement in crisis-affected countries to target crisis-affected populations.

A key theme this research explores is the benefits and disadvantages of siloing strategic priorities on 'the nexus' (or related terms such as fragility, resilience, risk, and peacebuilding), as opposed to mainstreaming these priorities across all development programmes. In addition, understanding the utility of the term 'nexus' as a concept

through which to frame efforts to enhance collaboration, coordination and coherence is a key part of this research.

What role does leadership play in encouraging development actors to address needs of crisis-affected populations?

Commitment and clear communication from the highest levels of leadership on the need to address difficult issues and make necessary changes to address the structural and bureaucratic barriers that development actors face in crisis countries will be key to making progress and driving cultural change. This research assesses and highlights learning on effective leadership on this agenda.

Conclusion

Our research is generating learning and filling an evidence gap on the different ways in which development actors engage and could strengthen support to resilience, preparedness, recovery and peacebuilding for a more durable approach and greater impact on crisis-affected people. We are identifying recommendations for development actors to systematise and scale-up operations in crisis contexts, working collectively with humanitarian and peace actors for greater impact.

A country report on Cameroon will be published in November 2020 and will be followed by those on Somalia and Bangladesh. A synthesis report that brings together key learnings from the different contexts and sets out key recommendations will conclude the series of papers.

Appendix

Box 1: Definitions of key terms

Nexus: This paper uses ‘nexus’ or ‘triple nexus’ as shorthand terms for the connections between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding approaches. We align with the OECD DAC definition:

“Nexus approach’ refers to the aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity. The approach seeks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each pillar – to the extent of their relevance in the specific context – in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict.”⁸

Achieving collaboration, coherence and complementarity means quite different things to different actors. We understand the three ambitions to sit on a spectrum from complementarity to coherence, with complementarity the minimum requirement for approaching the nexus. At the higher end of the spectrum, the nexus can fundamentally challenge existing divisions between humanitarian, development and peace systems, encouraging stronger coherence and working towards shared outcomes. The concept of shared or collective outcomes was conceived by the UN in preparation for and follow-up to the World Humanitarian Summit and recently adopted in the UN-IASC Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes.⁹ We also recognise that there are three dual nexuses within the triple nexus – the well-established humanitarian–development, the development–peace and humanitarian–peace nexuses.

This report focuses explicitly on the role of development actors, covering the development–peace and development–humanitarian nexuses. Specifically, this means understanding how development actors are working collaboratively, coherently and complementarily with humanitarian and peace actors at the strategic, practical, and institutional levels to address the needs of vulnerable crisis-affected populations. This will translate into actions under a range of existing concepts including resilience, recovery, inclusion and peacebuilding, and embedding risk.

Resilience: We align with the OECD DAC definition:

“The ability of households, communities, and nations to absorb and recover from shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term stresses, change and uncertainty. Resilience is about

addressing the root causes of crises whilst strengthening the capacities and resources of a system in order to cope with risks, stresses and shocks.”¹⁰

Resilience is understood as cross-cutting to humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities.

Early recovery: An approach that addresses recovery needs arising during the humanitarian phase of an emergency, using humanitarian mechanisms that align with development principles. The multidimensional process of recovery begins in the early days of a humanitarian response.

Recovery: This is the restoration, and improvement where appropriate, of facilities, livelihoods and living conditions of disaster-affected communities, including efforts to reduce disaster risk factors, largely through development assistance.¹¹

Development: This report focuses explicitly on the role of development actors and actions in crisis contexts. Here, we understand ‘development’ as long-term support to developing countries to deliver sustainable solutions for addressing poverty, supporting livelihoods and providing basic services, with a particular focus on those in greatest need and furthest behind. We understand development actors to include donors, NGOs, UN agencies, multilateral development banks, local and national authorities, and private sector and community-based organisations.

Peace: There are many ways to understand conflict and peace, and clear overlaps with development and resilience. In this report, where there is not yet consensus on what is covered in the ‘peace’ aspect of the triple nexus, we understand it to include conflict prevention, conflict sensitivity (to ensure programming avoids harm and where possible builds peace), peacebuilding and mediation efforts at local, national and regional levels. To cover all possible ‘peace related’ activities in the research, we have included a focus on stabilisation and efforts to tackle violent extremism though recognise the contentions between political priorities on security and stability and safeguarding humanitarian principles.

Humanitarian action: Humanitarian action is intended to:

“...save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after man-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur.”¹²

Furthermore, humanitarian action should be governed by the key humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Notes

- ¹ Development Initiatives, 2019. From withdrawal to adaptation: How can development actors shift towards sustaining engagement and financing at scale during a crisis? Available at: www.devinit.org/blog/development-actors-shift-approach-sustain-engagement-financing-scale-crisis/ (accessed 2 September 2020)
- ² OECD, 2019. DAC recommendation on the OECD humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Available at: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5019>
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- ⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations website: www.fao.org/home/en/
- ⁷ Norwegian Refugee Council website: www.nrc.no/
- ⁸ OECD, 2019. DAC recommendation on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Available at: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5019>
- ⁹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2020. UN-IASC Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes. Available at: www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-standing-committee/un-iasc-light-guidance-collective-outcomes
- ¹⁰ OECD, 2013. What does “resilience” mean for donors? Available at: www.oecd.org/dac/May%202010%202013%20FINAL%20resilience%20PDF.pdf
- ¹¹ United Nations Development Programme, 2017. Recovery Guidance Note. Available at: www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/climate-and-disaster-resilience-/recovery-guidance-note.html
- ¹² ALNAP, 2018. Defining humanitarian aid. Available at: www.alnap.org/help-library/defining-humanitarian-aid

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