

Carina Yıldırım-Schlüsing, Marie Müller-Koné, Birgit Kemmerling, Rodrigo Bolaños Suárez, Boubacar Haidara, Esther Meininghaus, Riyadh Al-Khadhra, Summer Brown, Almamy Koné, John Rutaro

Three Ways to Support Locally-led Peace in the HDP Nexus

The key to operationalising the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) nexus, preventing crisis and building peace from the bottom-up is to understand local conflict dynamics and peace visions. Donors and UN agencies must support analyses at the sub-national level, adapt analytical tools to identify local peace visions, and mandate funding models that ensure the equitable participation of local organisations.

Recommendations

1. Provide funding for regular and mandatory context and conflict analyses at the sub-national level to operationalise the HDP nexus approach.

In protracted crisis situations, conflict dynamics vary considerably between localities within states and can change rapidly, making it challenging to implement peace activities that are adapted to local realities. To address this, donors should fund regular and mandatory context and conflict analyses *at the municipal or sub-county level*, which include the time and human resources of (I)NGOs and local organisations. This will help increase local ownership and, subsequently, lead to more sustainable outcomes.

2. Develop or adapt existing analytical tools to identify diverse visions of peace in local communities.

Common goals framed in terms of 'collective outcomes', as promoted in UN and OECD guidance for HDP nexus operationalisation, have difficulties in accommodating diverse or even conflicting peace goals and understandings in some contexts. To align activities, particularly in peacebuilding, with local realities, capacities, and needs, analytical tools must provide insights into the *diverse visions of peace* of individuals and communities in localities where projects are implemented.

3. Create funding models that ensure the equitable participation of local organisations in HDP nexus operationalisation.

Local organisations are best placed to lead peace activities because of their contextual knowledge and experience—often working across all three pillars of the HDP nexus. However, they still play a minor role in projects with international funding. To increase equity between international and local organisations, funding calls should require that at least 50 per cent of consortia funding be allocated to local organisations to ensure that they have a co-lead in project design and risk-taking decisions. In addition, donors should require a minimum share of overheads, i.e., indirect cost recovery (ICR), to go to subcontracted local organisations to enable their institutional learning.

Background

How to support peacebuilding in protracted crisis contexts—and avoid fuelling conflicts—remains one of the most challenging questions for humanitarian, development and peacebuilding implementors.¹ The humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus as part of the ‘New Way of Working’ aims to increase the sustainability of aid, help prevent or end recurring cycles of violence and thus to be more cost-effective.²

Donors have supported HDP nexus operationalisation by providing multi-year, more flexible funding and by offering financial–administrative solutions to overcome siloed structures. In target countries, the United Nations is often the driving force behind the implementation of the HDP nexus, championing “collective outcomes” as mutually agreed results among UN agencies, national governments and (I)NGOs to be achieved over a period of three to five years. Collective outcomes require a common normative grounding, based on joint conflict analysis and coordination. Our research shows that (I)NGO staff perceive these efforts to operationalise the HDP nexus as a donor-driven, top-down process. We see risks in the political nature of any peacebuilding exercise and in the UN-led HDP nexus approach:

On the one hand, the question of who should lead HDP nexus coordination is key. In many contexts, it is problematic for the military, for example, to play a leading role, as humanitarian and development organisations may then be perceived as linked to the state military. In Mali, the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA became a key player in the HDP nexus from 2017 onwards, which prompted (I)NGOs to distance themselves from the approach to avoid being associated with MINUSMA.

On the other, common objectives formulated as collective outcomes rarely take into account the different understandings of peace in the target countries, which our research has shown to deviate significantly from the definitions of peace in the literature or handbooks. In any given context, within and across localities, goals for peace are diverse and often also contradictory. Local and national organisations often possess the contextual knowledge required for this.³ However, we observe that these organisations have so far received little direct funding and have only limited involvement in the operationalisation of the HDP nexus.

The failure to localise the HDP nexus approach leads, at best, to peace activities that are disconnected from the realities of the people. At worst, political sensitivities go unrecognised and unintentionally create or exacerbate conflict, for instance, when armed actors attack humanitarian staff. To address this risk, we argue that there is an urgent need for donors to commit to localising the HDP nexus: promoting localised context and conflict analysis, adjusting peacebuilding activities to local visions of peace and needs and increasing the participation and decision-making power of local organisations.

1 Fund mandatory conflict analyses at the municipal or sub-country level

If donors, UN agencies and (I)NGOs are to support peacebuilding and link humanitarian and development interventions in protracted crises, understanding local conflict dynamics and peace visions is crucial. However, we find that many (I)NGOs lack the time and capacity to conduct timely and regular conflict analyses. Often, these analyses are only carried out after projects have started and funding has been secured, with little opportunity to adjust activities. Moreover, analyses tend to focus on the meso or macro level, which risks that (I)NGOs fail to identify local differences in the design of peace activities, with implications for effectiveness.

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Our research shows that, particularly in the context of protracted crises, conflict dynamics can differ significantly even between localities in close proximity to each other. The Mopti region in Mali is a case in point. Many conflict analyses on Mopti frame the conflicts as inter-communal, for instance, in the two localities of Bandiagara and Kora. However, they have different drivers, actors and root causes that exist inside and outside the communities. Bandiagara is a locality predominantly inhabited by people who identify as Dogon, where armed groups, notably jihadists, have brutally attacked the civilian population. But young Dogon have joined these groups and are fighting their own community, mainly due to a lack of prospects and employment opportunities. In Kora, the main type of conflict is between farmers, herders and fishermen over access rights to natural resources. Conflict analyses at the sub-national level can capture these differences and prevent activities along the HDP nexus from failing to reflect people's realities.

At the same time, conflict dynamics can change rapidly in protracted crisis contexts. In Central Equatoria in South Sudan, for instance, an armed group that did not sign the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has continued to fight government forces. Conflict dynamics are constantly changing. The volatile security situation is posing

challenges for (I)NGO humanitarian access to villages, the planning and implementation of reconstruction and peacebuilding activities. To ensure adaptive programming, regular or situation-dependent analyses are essential, in addition to flexible budgets, to assess changes and appropriate responses. Otherwise, there is a risk that multi-annual projects will not be able to respond to people's changing and multidimensional needs.

Bi- or multilateral donors have a crucial role to play in assessing the benefits and risks of activities. To this end, donors should fund mandatory context and conflict analyses, which, in addition to budget flexibility, includes the time and human resources of (I)NGOs and local organisations. Essentially, these analyses must take into account the conflict dynamics at the municipal or sub-country level. For multi-annual projects, we recommend a preparation phase of three to six months, depending on the overall duration of the project, to allow implementing UN agencies, (I)NGOs or local organisations to carry out a (joint) context and conflict analysis and to adjust HDP activities on the basis of the results. Donors should provide funding for regular or situation-specific analyses as a basis for an adaptive, flexibly funded, programme management that takes into account the rapidly changing and competing agendas for local peace.

2 Adapt analytical tools to identify diverse visions of peace

The type of knowledge produced by these analyses is equally important. Donors, UN agencies and (I)NGOs have already developed guidance notes and tools for conflict analysis, focusing on gender-sensitive conflict, the relationship between climate change and conflict, or resilience, depending on the purpose of the programmes. For example, the resilience tool developed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) provides guiding questions for generating knowledge about crises and shocks that affect local populations and their impact on the resilience of individuals and communities. Most of these analyses include local perspectives on conflict dynamics, conflict actors, their drivers and root causes as well as existing mechanisms to solve these conflicts.

In the context of HDP nexus operationalisation, donors, UN agencies or (I)NGOs often define the goal of 'positive peace' as the process of creating equitable socio-economic and

political conditions to prevent the outbreak of war and violence. Despite this clear conceptual definition, in practice, positive peace can mean different things to people in very different local communities and personal situations.

However, analyses rarely take into account diverse local visions of peace. Our findings show that the closer the interviewees were to armed conflict, either in terms of place or time, the more they tended to define peace according to the notion of ‘negative peace,’ i.e. the absence of war. In several localities in the Mopti region of Mali, where jihadists have fought for control, communities have accepted local ‘peace agreements’ with armed groups as the only way to stop atrocities. Interviewees described this absence of fighting as peace.

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Aiming for positive peace could mean strengthening social cohesion. This can be done, for example, by relying on local conflict resolution mechanisms, which, in the case of South Sudan, are widely accepted and able to resolve or prevent the escalation of conflict in communities by seeking restorative justice rather than individual punishment. However, these local mechanisms also run the risk of reifying existing local power hierarchies and social inequalities, for example, where women are disadvantaged. Promoting peace could also mean supporting socio-economic change in conflicts, as described above for the Malian locality of Bandiagara, where young men joined armed groups mainly because of a lack of prospects and employment opportunities.

In Iraq, many of those we interviewed for our research believe that peace will be achieved when the state guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, regardless of their identification with ethnic or religious minority groups or gender. Minority groups, in particular, call for the prosecution of Daesh perpetrators of the 2014 genocide against minorities and perceive an immense lack of equality before the law, widespread corruption and competing armed groups that feed patronage networks that work against peace in the communities.

For donors, UN agencies and (I)NGOs, this means that the peace agendas that they pursue within one locality may differ significantly and clash with local notions of peace. Concretely, context and conflict analysis tools need to include guiding questions about what peace means to different individuals and communities. A useful participatory approach is the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) methodology for designing and assessing locally-led peacebuilding activities (<https://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org/>).

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Equally important is guidance on sampling respondents and informants. For instance, conducting only key informant interviews and focus group discussions may under-represent the voices of marginalised people and lead to a bias. Instead, in-depth interviews should be added with individuals from different identity, age and gender groups as well as socio-economic backgrounds. Guidance should also ensure that implementing organisations discuss the trade-offs of different peace goals with the affected populations, so that a common and informed decision can be made on how to proceed. In this way, project activities can respond to local realities and achieve greater local ownership.

3 Create financing models for the equitable participation of local organisations

Local organisations are central to HDP nexus operationalisation but have not yet been recognised as such. By these organisations, we mean non-state organisations “engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and which are not affiliated to an international NGO” (IASC Localisation Marker Working Group, 2018, p. 2).⁴ These include national NGOs that are headquartered in the recipient country but operate throughout the country or local NGOs that are based and operate in specific localities. Many of these organisations have years of HDP

experience, the ability to work in crisis regions, contextual knowledge and language skills. Such NGOs can also act as intermediaries for the many informal community-based organisations (CBOs) that play an integral role in the successful implementation of development or peacebuilding projects in many conflict-affected areas.

Our research shows that local organisations are struggling to access funding and play a greater decision-making role in implementing HDP nexus approaches. Despite the commonly agreed goal of the 'New Way of Working' to allocate at least 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local organisations as directly as possible by 2020, in 2023, for example, they received only 4.4 per cent through just one intermediary, and 0.6 per cent directly (Development Initiatives, 2024).

The (siloe) funding structures of bilateral and multilateral donors are one reason for this imbalance. Donors channel most of the funding through bilateral mechanisms, either directly to UN agencies, national governments or international NGOs. The German government reports that 20 per cent of its humanitarian funding in 2024 went to (I)NGOs, the rest to international organisations (Federal Foreign Office, 2024, p. 28). Local organisations usually access parts of these funds through subcontracts with UN agencies and (I)NGOs or as local partners in consortia, with low rates of core funding.

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Pooled funds are a mechanism to improve the coordination between HDP nexus actors at the international, national and local levels. At the country level, pooled funding exists for different sectors and across the HDP nexus pillars; in some cases, NGOs operating in the recipient country can apply for these funds. In South Sudan, the Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) is one of the pooled funding mechanisms to support HDP nexus operationalisation and is open to consortia of UN agencies, international NGOs and local organisations. However, coordination mechanisms within consortia remain hierarchical, with UN agencies in the lead, followed by INGOs and only then local organisations.

Another reason for this under-representation is the lack of donor confidence in the capacity and accountability of local organisations. For example, Iraqi NGOs received

only four per cent of overall international funding in 2021 (Meininghaus, 2024). One of the main arguments against supporting local NGOs in Iraq has been the alleged high level of corruption. However, there is a strong discrepancy between evaluations on corruption carried out for local organisations on the one hand and for UN agencies and (I)NGOs on the other. This shows a bias towards local organisations compared to UN agencies and (I)NGOs, as later investigations into corruption within UNDP Iraq revealed (Meininghaus, 2024). By reducing local organisations to subcontractors or 'junior' partners in consortia, UN agencies and international NGOs retain decision-making and financial power over project design and spending. Local organisations are less flexible in responding, have little room to participate in decision-making processes and to develop or maintain their own portfolio.

Donors have a key role to play in supporting equitable partnerships between UN agencies, international NGOs and local organisations: They should create funding models that allow NGOs or civil society organisations that are not registered in the donor country to compete for funding.

At the same time, local organisations and local staff of UN agencies or (I)NGOs take the greatest risks, because they implement activities in project localities. Many of the crisis contexts in which the HDP nexus is applied are among the most dangerous for aid workers. However, local organisations or local staff of UN agencies and (I)NGOs are not covered by the same evacuation and compensation mechanisms as international staff.

Donors have a key role to play in supporting equitable partnerships between UN agencies, international NGOs and local organisations: They should create funding models that allow NGOs or civil society organisations that are not registered in the donor country to compete for funding. One way to do this is to increase unearmarked funding in pooled funds in recipient countries. Another way is to give preference to consortia as coordination mechanisms and to channel at least 50 per cent of consortium funding to local organisations, as the German government has already done in some calls. This helps to facilitate equitable partnerships and co-leadership of local organisations in decision-making. The exact proportion may vary depending on the specific context. Yet, it is important to strictly define local organisations as NGOs headquartered and operating in the recipient country without affiliation to international NGOs.

Where local organisations are subcontracted to UN organisations or INGOs, donors should allocate at least ten per cent of overheads, i.e., indirect cost recovery (ICR), to local organisations to support their institutional development (as is currently good practice with some INGOs). UN agencies and INGOs should be required to report publicly on how much they subcontract or

grant to local partners.⁵ It is also important that local organisations and local staff of international agencies have a co-lead in decision-making on risk taking and risk sharing. Donors should ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to compensate all actors in the HDP nexus for additional risk-taking.

Endnotes

1. This *bicc policy brief* draws on empirical research in Mali, Iraq and South Sudan conducted by bicc as part of the research project “How can the HDP succeed? NGOs Between Humanitarian Aid, Development Cooperation and Peacebuilding” (2021–2025) in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH). The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It is the result of deliberations at the conference “Ways Forward for the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: How to Conceptualise and Implement Peace Activities?” held in Bonn on 19 to 20 September 2024, a collaboration between bicc, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH).
2. For details on the New Way of Working see the following publication: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2018-04/hdn_toolkit.pdf.
3. Following the definition of the Localisation Marker Working Group (2018, p.2), we define local organisations as non-governmental organisations engaged in relief, development and peacebuilding that are headquartered and operate in their own aid recipient country and are not affiliated with an international NGO, thus excluding country offices of INGOs.
4. Not affiliated means being independent from fundraising and governance structures.
5. Mapping of UN agencies and INGOs by DDI, 2022: <https://devinit.github.io/resources/overhead-cost-allocation-humanitarian-sector/mapping-of-ingos-un-agencies/>

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Key readings

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BICC – Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies gGmbH
Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany

CONTACT
Elvan Isikozlu
Head of Advice & Scientific Transfer
elvan.isikozlu@bicc.de
+49 (0)228 911 96-54

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