THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS AMIDST THE GLOBAL COLLAPSE OF CRISIS FINANCING

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INTRODUCTION

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus has evolved into a meta-policy framework, widely promoted as a solution to protracted crises, linking short-term relief, long-term development, and peacebuilding. Practically, however, its implementation is burdened by complexity and increasing fatigue. Rather than articulating a coherent strategy, the HDP Nexus oscillates between small-scale programmatic adjustments and ambitious multi-donor, multi-actor and multi-country frameworks, with a wide plurality of interpretations, operational models, and conceptual understandings. This lack of clarity undermines coordination and generates confusion among practitioners and donors alike. At the same time, the HDP Nexus is unfolding amid a collapse in international cooperation financing, marked by shrinking budgets across the H, D, and P sectors, rising narratives calling for transactional funding, and a focus on short-term humanitarian needs rather than addressing the root causes of vulnerability.

Compounding these challenges is a broader erosion of trust in the international rules-based order. The legitimacy of multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), is increasingly contested, forcing these actors to turn inward to address issues of governance, credibility and accountability. Meanwhile, a changing self-conception among Global South partners – with growing political and economic agency – as well as a wider choice in South-South security and development partnerships, has led to calls for more reciprocal and equitable partnerships, often marginalising traditional development cooperation models. In this volatile context, the HDP Nexus framework risks becoming more open to instrumentalisation unless its objectives are matched by political resolve, adaptable financing, and genuine partnership.

The article provides an overview of where the HDP Nexus debate stands amid a crisis of legitimacy and funding in multilateralism. It firstly introduces the origins and developments of the concept. It then outlines tensions and reservations between the principles and mandates of the different sectors. It then highlights some implications for the HDP Nexus of recent reform initiatives and structural adaptations as a response to funding shortfalls. Lastly, the article discusses potential opportunities for nexus thinking in a post-aid era.

MIND THE GAP: WHAT IS THE HDP NEXUS?

ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT

The Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus – or Triple Nexus – is a policy concept that envisions stronger collaboration and coordination among actors from the fields of development, humanitarian action and peacebuilding. The idea of linking humanitarian with development interventions has been around for a long time. The earliest attempt to solidify thinking into a more coherent conceptualisation was in the 1980s under the paradigm of linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD). In the late 1990s, as humanitarian aid increased during active armed conflict and in so-called 'highly-fragile states', the debate shifted to link assistance more closely with state and peacebuilding objectives, thereby expanding the 'P' element (Harmer/Macrae 2004). Yet, these approaches failed to facilitate a continuous and reliable transition between humanitarian and development work. Aid actors understood that, to address the gap, they had to tackle key challenges, including a bifurcated aid structure, separate donor funding, and profoundly different modi operandi and mandates (Kocks et al. 2018; Macrae 2019). At the same time, pressure increased due to an overburdened aid system with stagnating funding vis-à-vis increasing humanitarian needs, as well as the growing frustration with a 'band-aid' approach that had proven insufficient for sustaining care in contexts of long-term displacement or providing assistance over extended periods of crisis (Hilhorst 2007). This realisation was fu-

elled by evidence pointing to the increasingly protracted nature of displacement and humanitarian response. At the time, data indicated that the average duration of displacement exceeded 26 years and that 80 % of humanitarian resources were allocated to conflicts in countries subject to humanitarian appeals lasting more than 5 years (Caparini/Reagan 2019; UNHCR 2017). Promoting peace and conflict-sensitive interventions were seen as means to reduce humanitarian needs ('shrinking the needs'). This led to a renewed call for coherence under the HDP Nexus framework, issued at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and the UN Secretary-General's *Agenda for Humanity* (UN 2016).

Since 2016, key global actors of crisis engagement have made policy shifts to foster the HDP Nexus. The joint study, *Pathways for Peace*, by the UN and the World Bank (WB) in 2018 underscored the importance of investing in conflict prevention and the conflict-sensitivity of international interventions (United Nations/World Bank 2018). These findings informed the OECD DAC Recommendations (2019) on fostering Nexus approaches among Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors (OECD 2019). In 2020, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – a high-level coordination body for humanitarian aid – issued light guidance tools, mapping tools and best practices (IASC 2021, 2020). Meanwhile, the HDP Nexus had become a policy approach to multilateral governance, alternating between small-scale programmatic adjustments and large-scale multi-actor frameworks. This plurality of concepts and approaches can prove helpful but also overwhelming.

MAJOR GLOBAL ACTORS' FRAMEWORKS

One of the key strategies outlined by major global actors is the UN-led *New Way of Working framework* (OCHA 2018). This is based on joint action in areas such as data collection, assessment, planning, and reforming financing modalities (including a new instrument called the Humanitarian Development Peace and Partnership Facility, HDPP), whilst also devolving more operational leadership to Resident Coordinators (RCs) (Zamore 2019). Key measures included greater coherence between the UN Sustainable Development Frameworks (UNSDCF) and humanitarian appeals (HNO/HRP) under the leadership of the respective UN country team. Yet, even among the designated seven UN/WB Nexus pilot countries, efforts to operationalise the framework vary considerably, ranging from defining common priorities to establishing Nexus task forces to aligning plans with national or provincial host governments.

In parallel, with the Council Conclusion on the Nexus (EU Council 2017), the European Union (EU) issued its own approach, more centred around 'resilience'. The operational emphasis rested on internal coherence and cooperation among EU institutions and Member States ("Team Europe"), as well as on integrating instruments on crisis management, climate, migration and security (Ansell 2025; Baroncelli 2024; Pichon 2025). Growing concerns about 'humanitarianising security' in the EU's engagement in conflict-affected states have been voiced since the announcement of an integrated approach to fragility and the introduction of the gearbox approach of the EU Global Gateway, where projects are currently underway in 36 of 60 fragile contexts (Hauck/Desmidt 2024; Pichon 2025).

TENSIONS IN GOALS AND PRINCIPLES

Key concerns for operationalising the HDP Nexus have emerged due to tensions in the goals, mandates and principles of those actors seeking to link their work. Often, development, peacebuilding and humanitarian mandates are incompatible because of how closely they align and collaborate with host governments. Development interventions address governance and infrastructure challenges, often requiring direct engagement with host governments. Where governments may lack legitimacy, are party to a conflict, or where the UN is perceived as siding with one party over another, humanitarian actors may view alignment as threatening the humanitarian principle of neutrality and their perceived non-partisan status. Integrating into a larger HDP framework might, therefore, jeopardise neutrality and independence in the eyes of affected communities, increasing perceptions of instrumentalisation or politicisation of aid (DuBois 2020; Hövelmann 2020b). Similarly, peacebuilding requires a political positioning by forming agreements among conflict parties, including political or military elites. This positioning may be a threat to principled humanitarian aid.

Moreover, there are caveats regarding the P component. Different interpretations exist on how to integrate peace, including 'doing no harm', better risk and conflict sensitivity analysis, bottom-up, community-based peacebuilding,

and conflict transformation and stabilisation agendas. These approaches include different actors in a conflict or target different stages of its resolution. For example, peace-making includes efforts to stop active violence and reach agreements between conflicting parties. At the same time, peacebuilding encompasses long-term efforts to address the root causes of conflict. The concept of peace in the Nexus oscillates between two poles: the 'small p' and the 'big P'. Small p initiatives involve grassroots efforts at peacebuilding, social cohesion and community building. Big P interventions are large-scale, formal processes, such as national peace agreements, mediation efforts, counter-terrorism, stabilisation or peacekeeping missions (Böttcher/Wittkowsky 2021). The conceptual uncertainty and resulting openness to interpretation between peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding further adds to the complexity of Nexus approaches and can lead to misalignments between donor-driven agendas and affected community preferences (Brown et al. 2024).

Local perceptions of these dynamics vary. For example, local faith-based organisations in South Sudan appreciated the reintegration of HDP components, whose separation they regarded as artificial and enforced through external actors (de Wolf/Wilkinson 2019; Quack/Südhoff 2020), while in Mali local humanitarian responders were more careful to distance themselves from other actors' political agendas (Steinke 2021; Tronc et al. 2019).

Though many approaches have been tried under a Nexus umbrella – bottom-up or top-down, within organisations or inter-agency, large or small scale, across contexts or very localised, continuous or contiguous – there is collective fatigue in the face of its complexity. It is easy, therefore, to discuss it 'at arm's length' where the reasons as to why approaches fall short are often sought elsewhere. Accountability is often deflected through lamenting missing incentives – such as if only donors had better linked-up financing mechanisms; if only development actors would take over in a fragile context, and so on (see for example Bowden/Lilly 2024).

Yet, what is often underestimated is the pursuit to address underlying institutional power dynamics, ideology and culture, which, in the Nexus, are frequently deprioritised in favour of technical solutions such as coordination mechanisms, instruments or tools (DuBois 2020). Nexus approaches are designed to serve as technocratic fixes to "address the very problems created by the system it seeks to reform" (Steinke 2025). Insofar as the HDP Nexus is understood as a hegemonic/Western technocratic response, its fate is closely linked with the survival of multilateralism overall. Meanwhile, there is no clarity or common understanding of what this conceptualisation of the Nexus looks like in practice (Morinière/Morrison-Métois 2023; Südhoff et al. 2020).

HDP NEXUS AND THE GLOBAL CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM

If we understand the HDP Nexus as a large, state-led framework run by major global actors, then it is strongly affected by today's crisis of multilateralism, as international organisations and global governance structures face growing rejection.

As the world's largest humanitarian and development donor, the United States (US) under the Trump Administration sent shockwaves throughout the multilateral system when it announced the end of USAID. In 2024, the US had contributed 40 % of global humanitarian financing, more than the combined contributions of the next ten top donor states (FTS 2024). With the dismantling of the largest development and aid agency came not only a drastic funding cut but also, arguably, the death of the liberal international order and of aid as a form of soft power more broadly (Sumner/Klingebiel 2025).

A CRISIS OF MORALITY, LEGITIMACY AND FUNDING

The end of USAID, instigated by an Executive Order that froze and ultimately suspended 83 % of US-supported humanitarian and development programmes, sent the humanitarian system tumbling (Hövelmann/Südhoff 2025). For the largest humanitarian organisations – UN agencies (e.g., WFP, UNHCR) and NGOs (e.g., IRC, Care) – US support, which accounted for up to 40 % of their funding, disappeared overnight (Bashir Ghafarzai 2025). This immediately led to the forced termination of HIV/AIDs programs in South Africa, therapeutic feeding for malnourished children in Yemen or drinking water supply in refugee camps. According to estimates, US foreign aid was saving or sustaining 3.3 million lives worldwide per year (Kenny/Sandefur 2025), and Cavalcanti et al. (2025) forecast that the end of USAID could lead to 14 million additional avoidable deaths by 2030. The impact

of cuts was felt not only by programmes receiving direct US funding, but also by logistics and supply chains, crucial data streams for response plans and decision-making, and critical partnerships with local actors and service providers.

To address the impact of the funding cuts, UN Emergency Relief Chief Tom Fletcher called for a 'Humanitarian Reset'. He proposed 10 actions for reforming and restructuring the aid system (OCHA 2025a). Despite outlining mostly technical fixes (cutting back meetings, lean coordination processes, reducing bureaucracy and inefficiencies), Fletcher acknowledged that the humanitarian system itself was at the centre of a crisis of funding, morale and legitimacy. He urged the international community to be "ruthless in eliminating turf wars" and to "work genuinely together […], give up power and act collectively" (ibid.: 2). In fact, the proposals tabled in February 2025 far exceeded previous attempts to ensure better coherence. For example, Fletcher proposed to the IASC that Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) would have more direct oversight over local UN country representatives or NGO country directors, a crucial step toward more coherent, linked-up approaches in a Nexus manner. Yet, by the end of the summer, the reform ambitions had been significantly watered down. Instead of clear accountability lines, UN and NGO representatives are "mutually accountable to the HC and local communities, as well as, of course, their agencies" (OCHA 2025b).

Urged by drastic funding shortfalls, the focus was on a hyper-prioritised overview of global humanitarian needs (also known as GHO). The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced that it would reduce the number of people targeted for humanitarian assistance from 177.7 million to 114 million, and transition out of eight countries where it had previously been active. Ideally, this retreat on the humanitarian side would have been designed by way of a Nexus approach, which would have ensured handover to local actors, development actors and long-term planning. Instead, however, cuts were made based on status quo considerations rather than on a future-oriented vision.

To make matters more complicated, the Humanitarian Reset is tied to a parallel reform process – UN80 – targeting the UN as a whole as the organisation turns 80. This process, while widely criticised as opaque and cosmetic, could – through its proposals for organisational restructuring – have a potentially radical effect on how the UN can deliver on HDP Nexus programming in the future. Early proposals, partly leaked, showcased ideas for substantial mergers of multiple UN agencies into thematic entities such as a UN Peace and Security Department, a single humanitarian entity combining five agencies and a UN Sustainable Development Department bringing together no fewer than 23 organisational bodies (unknown 2025).

However, any hopes that, in a moment of existential crisis, the UN would see through on painful but overdue reform were crushed when the *Shifting Paradigm* report was published at the UN General Assembly 2025 (UN 2025). Proposals to better link up the UN's humanitarian work (which, with 45 % of all funding, accounts for the majority of its work) with other parts of the organisation, for example, by merging OCHA with the Development Coordination Office (DCO), were not substantiated, despite the multidimensional and interrelated nature of most crises today (Lilly 2025). There were no mergers of IOM and UNHCR or WFP and FAO despite "turf wars", overlapping mandates and fragmentation. Instead, costs should be reduced through shared services, common, democratised data systems, and joint supply chains (OCHA 2025b).

Meanwhile, proposals for a leaner, agile and future-oriented UN are plentiful. Suggestions were tabled to streamline coordination arrangements down to the country level, to devolve authority to RC/HC with clearer oversight of agencies in the country, and to enhance their utility to support a linked-up response on the ground through Nexus-ready pooled funds that can fold in humanitarian, development and peace work. This would enable a more 'nexified' UN.

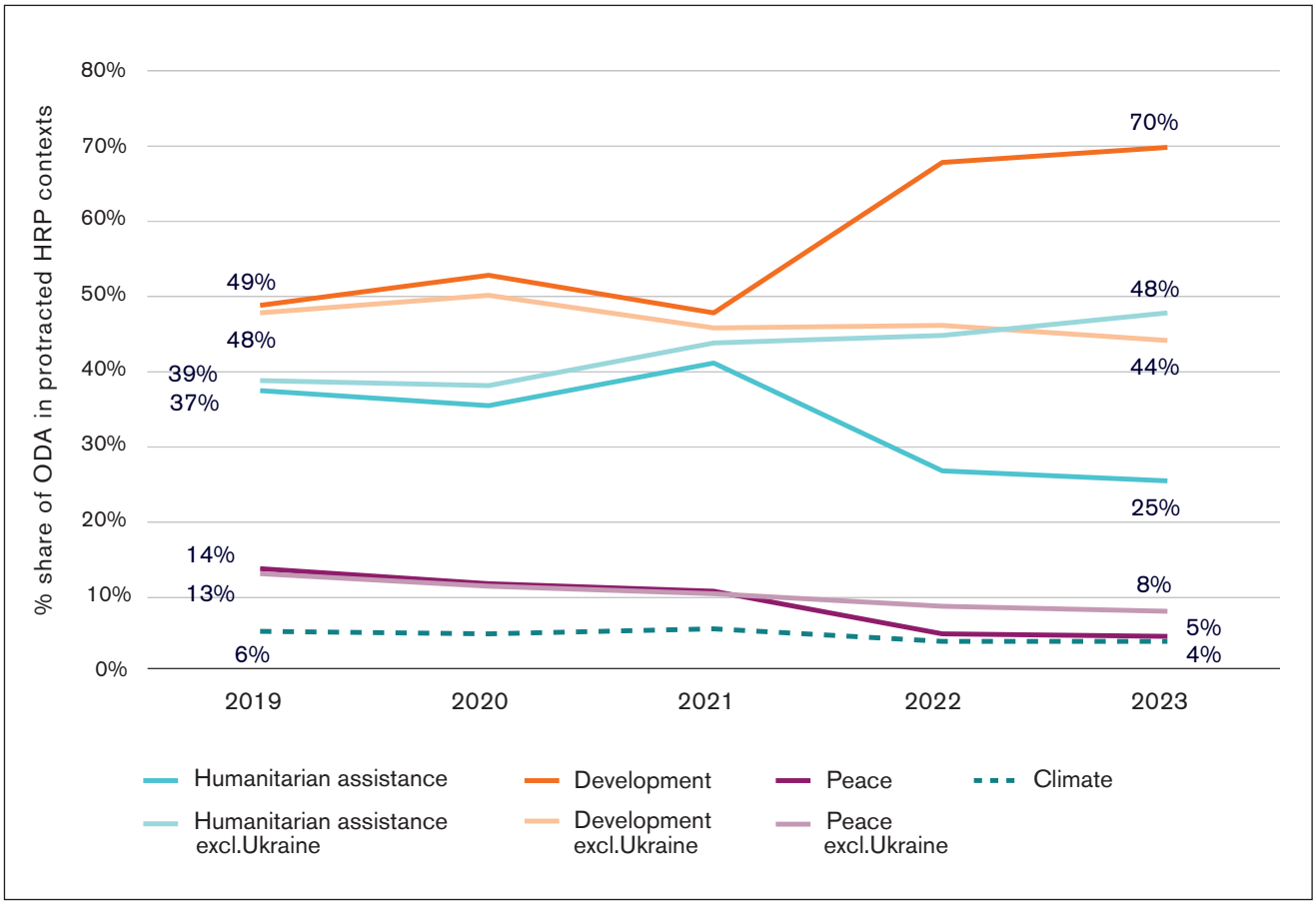
WHAT FUNDING SCENARIOS FOR HDP FINANCING ARE COMING?

Contrary to the prevailing perception, the shortfall in humanitarian assistance did not begin with the Trump Administration's cuts to USAID. In fact, figures show that the US contribution in 2023 masked a wider decline among other donors, including Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and many others that had already started cutting back on humanitarian assistance as early as 2022 (Obrecht/Pearson 2025). Estimates indicate that the global aid budget halved in 2025, with ODA cuts amounting to US $ 30 billion (ALNAP 2025;

SEEK Development 2025). As humanitarian funding dissipated, the need for well-crafted HDP programmes increased, without which millions of people in fragile and conflict-affected contexts would be left hanging in the balance as money runs out.

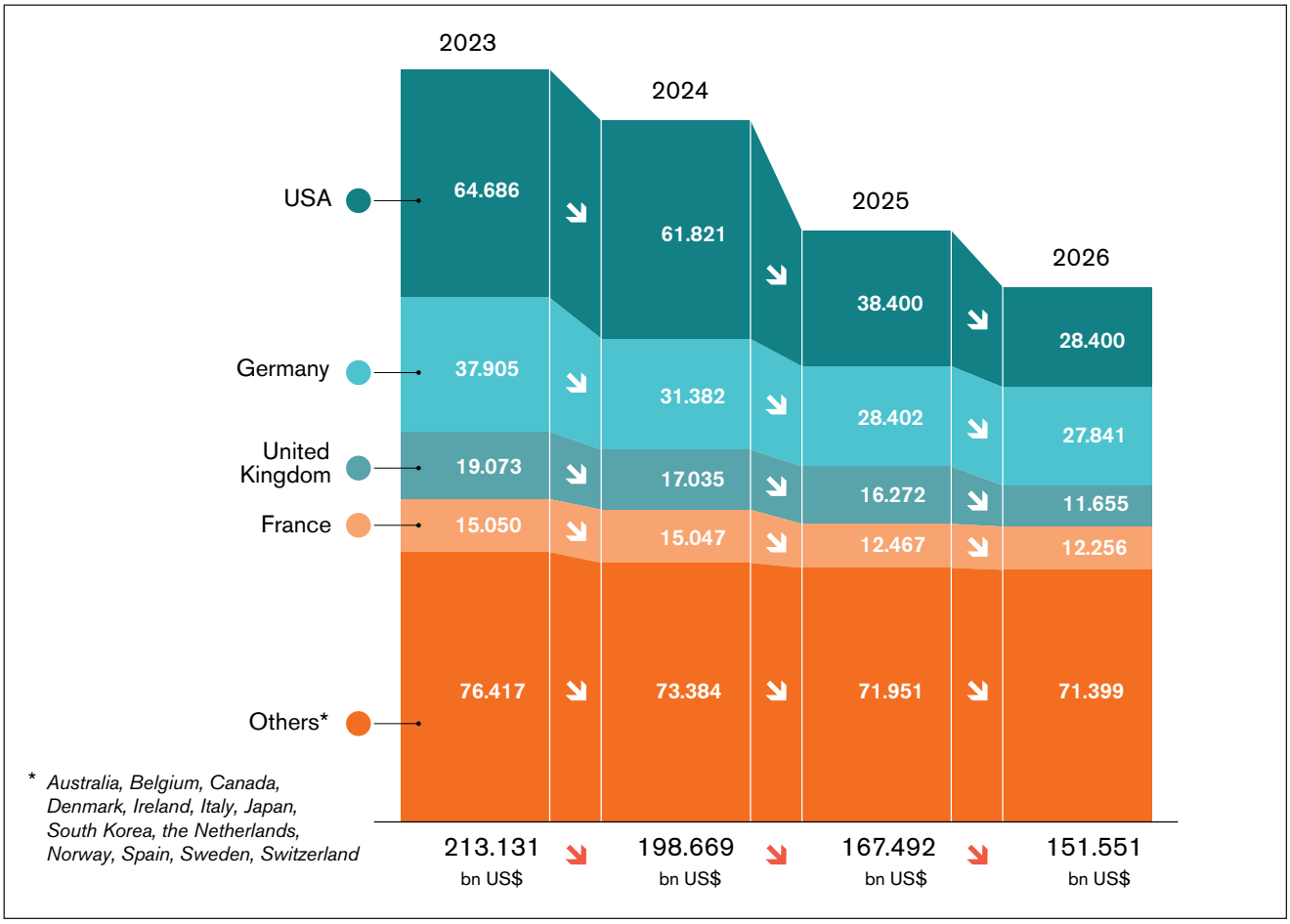
Figure A shows that in many protracted crises, humanitarian aid has become the main source of ODA. This is due to an increase in funding on the humanitarian side, which stands in contrast with stagnating figures on development and peace funding between 2014 and 2023 (ALNAP 2025). This contradicts the OEDC Nexus recommendation proposing "prevention always, development wherever possible, humanitarian action when necessary" (OECD 2019). It also runs counter to efforts to tackle the root causes of fragility and vulnerability in protracted crises, where humanitarian resources – typically provided through short-term grants averaging 12-18 months – and humanitarian principles are insufficient to address these challenges in a comprehensive, holistic manner. However, while implementing organisations may not be triple-mandated, state donors could – and most do – incentivise linked-up responses. Across the top 20 donors, the average distribution of funding within the HDP in 2023 comprised 13 % allocated to humanitarian assistance, 79 % to development and 8 % to peace (ALNAP 2025). This picture of Nexus financing may be changing as the prognosis for crisis financing foresees further downward trends in ODA and humanitarian aid (see Figures B and C), with some donors significantly reducing humanitarian aid relative to overall ODA funding. For example, between 2023 and 2025, Germany cut its development budget by around 20 % and its humanitarian budget by 60 % (Goltermann 2025). Other donors, such as Sweden, maintain humanitarian assistance at the expense of investments in development and peace (Labeille et al. 2025).

Figure A: Share of ODA to development, humanitarian, peace and climate from DAC donors to protracted HRP contexts



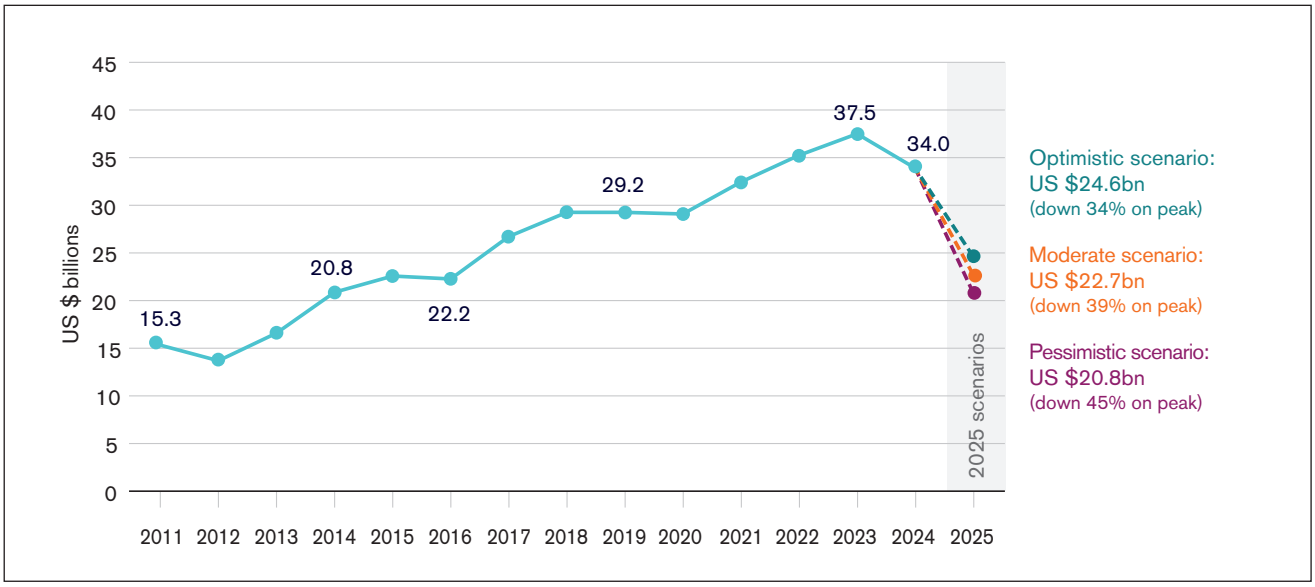
Source: ALNAP 2025

Figure B: Projected decline in ODA from the 17 largest donor countries (in billions of US $, in constant 2023 prices, in grant equivalents)



Source: Terre des Hommes / Welthungerhilfe e.V. 2025

Figure C: Three scenarios for humanitarian funding from public donors in 2025



Source: ALNAP 2025: 5

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HDP NEXUS IN A POST-AID ERA

MOVING FORWARD, WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE HDP NEXUS AMIDST THE COLLAPSE OF GLOBAL CRISIS FINANCING?

Amidst the Humanitarian Reset, humanitarian leadership demanded greater scrutiny towards the added value of each organisation. The unparalleled growth in aid budgets between 2015 and 2022 allowed for and favoured expanded mandates. These mandates are now called into question. UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Tom Fletcher, called for self-critical introspection to identify where each element of the humanitarian system – UN entities, INGOs, local NGOs – adds unique value. However, bureaucratic institutions are often resistant to change. Withdrawing funding may arguably represent the only – albeit institutionally painful – means of enforcing change and of eliciting more candid assessments of institutional mandates and appropriate divisions of labour. That is, a return to core mandates may be the only way to take the wind out of a common conception that organisations must become triple-mandated, or that humanitarians must "do development or peace" for a successful HDP nexus (DuBois 2020). Instead, it is the moment for organisations to connect the dots in-house, recognise their differences, and be selective about where and in what capacity they can add value (Sturridge/Mayhew 2025). This would mark a shift from a situation in which funding shortfalls, institutional rivalry and ambiguous mandates have tended to encourage competition rather than cooperation among aid actors.

A further opportunity lies in fundamental localisation, making previous commitments to direct funding and equal decision-making a reality. The lines of segregation between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding are often regarded as arbitrary at the local level, and several studies have shown that most local actors already work holistically across these areas (MacDiarmid et al. 2021). In a common letter to the IASC, 21 large donors jointly committed to incentivise more local leadership and stronger coordination, including through area-based, multisectoral coordination at the sub-national level (GFFO et al. 2025). Yet, it is often the donor country's bifurcated budgetary laws that present the main hindrance to coherent nexus implementation on the local level. For example, in Germany, the Federal Audit Office demanded clear distinctions between humanitarian activities funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) and development projects by the Development Ministry (BMZ) (Bundesfinanzministerium 2018). For implementing organisations, effectively bridging these two funding instruments in practice continues to present a challenge. As a result, despite verbal commitments and well-intentioned policies, the humanitarian community is falling back on gains made in ensuring that local actors can access funding directly without intermediary organisations like INGOs or UN agencies (Metcalfe-Hough et al. 2022).

Beyond this, donor government interests play a role in the efficacy of the HDP Nexus, particularly in the context of limited funding. Governments tend to favour securitised approaches of the peace pillar rather than 'softer', bottom-up, inclusive processes (Hövelmann 2020a). As civil-society actors face increasing pressure from right-wing, populist, or authoritarian regimes, significantly reducing their space to act, an important group of actors in the Nexus becomes 'weaker' (Brot für die Welt 2025). This could mean that future HDP approaches centre on more state-led, structured frameworks by major global actors in countries that are within the realms of donor states' own narrow security interests. This rise in more transactional understandings of 'aid in the national interest' (Gulrajani 2025) risks sidelining needs- or rights-based approaches that target global public goods (such as health, climate, or inequality), global poverty reduction, or that seek to address root causes of vulnerabilities or fragility. This shift in focus on who is served with HDP approaches – communities or donor governments – could further instrumentalise and politicise the approach.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR CRISIS FINANCING

With drastic shortfalls in public development and aid budgets, prospects for 'unlocking' capital are sought elsewhere. ALNAP (2025) showcased that protracted crisis contexts, such as Cameroon, Nigeria and Mozambique, are paying more debt servicing costs (principal and interest repayments) than the total amount needed to fund their HRPs. They argue that the collective contributions for debt relief would be close to US $ 8 billion, while acknowledging that "unlocking finance for governments party to internal armed conflicts or perpetrating human rights violations would not support the reduction of humanitarian need" (ibid.: 55–56). Though a recurrent debate, there may be scope for approaches such as

humanitarian debt swaps, where savings from debt relief could be directed toward funding for conflict-affected, refugee-hosting or climate-prone communities. This approach could be an opportunity for certain crisis contexts, such as Mozambique, where OCHA announced its intention to transition out.

Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), such as the African or Asian Development Bank, have emerged more recently as actors on this landscape. For the past ten years, MDB engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts has increased through a range of tools and financing mechanisms (ALNAP 2025), although humanitarian funding has been in decline since 2021, with assistance provided more often in the form of repayable loans rather than grants (ibid.). The work of MDBs in advancing the HDP nexus, however, is still largely under-researched.

Lastly, perspectives have emerged – particularly from the Global South – that view the demise of USAID not as a disaster but a potential opportunity to shift development priorities away from charity and toward industrialisation and trade (Gathara 2025; Usman 2025). Moreover, this shift may expose the poorly concealed geopolitical control character and extractive global trade and governance regimes that the aid industry is widely argued to have obscured for decades. This may, therefore, finally allow neocolonial continuities with respect to economic interests to be addressed (Smillie/Minear 2004).

UNCERTAIN FUTURES FOR COOPERATION IN DEVELOPMENT AND AID

The funding cuts have put into sharp focus reform proposals that have been on the table for years, but that have not yet been implemented by decision-makers. There was a degree of optimism that, in a moment of existential crisis, the Humanitarian Reset would finally deliver on issues that had been paralysed for decades. However, the lack of consensus on the way forward – or rather, who should step out of the way for the Reset to move forward – and the paucity of concrete decisions taken have led to some disillusionment. To understand this impulse to cling on tight rather than release, change, or transform, it is important to acknowledge how unsettling these moves are for actors.

This uncertainty, contestation and fragmentation can be attributed to three major developments. Firstly, the multilateral system and liberalism, as a hegemonic norm, are increasingly under pressure. Withdrawal from international accords and violations of norms, such as those protecting civilians and aid workers, weaken the rules-based international order. Violations are no longer internationally detested or sanctioned. These direct and indirect attacks mean that international organisations of the H, D and P realm are weakened in their ability to deliver. Secondly, key actors of international cooperation come under operational pressure. Civil-society actors, in particular, face increasing strain from governments, including public defamation, funding cuts and repressive laws. Anti-NGO narratives and growing mistrust from wider parts of the global public further undermine their legitimacy and add to a shrinking civic space. Thirdly, development policy is further marginalised as a form of global partnership due to a changing self-understanding of Global South partners. Low- and middle-income countries have a wider range of options in their international relations portfolio, as countries such as China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey offer alternative development and security partnerships. At the same time, their economic progress enables them to demand greater levels of reciprocity. For "recipient governments", this competition means more choice in partnership offers and greater confidence in asserting their own priorities (Marschall/Klingebiel 2019).

These setbacks mean that humanitarian and development NGOs and IOs, especially those regarded as vassals of the Western world, including the UN/WB, EU, OECD-DAC donors, and INGOs, are deeply disoriented. With Nexus discourse predominantly shaped by these actors, challenges to their authority and legitimacy – which are occurring on multiple fronts – limit their scope to lead on the HDP Nexus discourse in the future.

Nexus thinking in an age of multilateral contestation and amidst a global financing crisis might fall into two camps: On the one hand, large-scale global frameworks, focused on securitised approaches with large budgets, may arise in contexts where donor governments define narrower national goals or security interests that can be achieved through HDP Nexus approaches. On the other hand, we may see a small-scale context-specific approach, for very localised and pragmatic solutions, beyond global stages, best practices or spectacle. The focus should be less on polished performances on panels in Western capitals and more on nexified thinking on the ground. This could help the development landscape reawaken from its

debilitating fatigue by reducing complexity in favour of pragmatic solutions and enabling local actors, rather than donor-driven solutions, to take the lead.

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