

Linking Thinking

Reflections on the Nexus

The Hague Humanity Hub
June 2019





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www.kuno-platform.nl

kuno@kuno-platform.nl

Cover photo: Open discussion

Author: Peter Heintze and Eliza Snel

Introduction

For over three decades, the international aid community has recognized the importance of working more closely together, in order to achieve better outcomes for people affected by ‘natural’ disasters and conflict-related crises. However, achieving this in practice has proved remarkably difficult.

The Grand Bargain (2016) put the so-called Humanitarian – Development Nexus high on the agenda. Again. And it immediately caused critical reflection: What is new in the newest nexus impulse? Has it a greater chance of success than previous efforts?

KUNO asked researcher Joanna Macrae to take stock of the ongoing debate and to look forward, which resulted in the research paper ‘*Linking Thinking*’: *Why it is so hard and what can we do about it?*

During a working session in The Hague in June, Joanna Macrae shared her main findings, which was followed by a debate with well-informed and experienced practitioner and academics.

Introductions were given by:

- Dr. **Joanna Macrae**, researcher and policy officer with broad experience, working for the UK government, the World Bank, and ODI.
- **Gerrit-Jan van Uffelen**, independent consultant & lecturer in Disaster Recovery Management at Van Hall Larenstein University.
- **Inge Leuwerink**, expert on emergency preparedness and humanitarian aid at Cordaid.

This report reflects the main findings of the presentation and of the debate. You will find the full report by Joanna Macrae via this [link](#).

Good opportunities for a relevant impulse for linking our thinking Linking Thinking - presentation by Joanna Macrae, author of the report

Why does “linking thinking” matter?

We currently have a situation where poverty and vulnerability are increasingly concentrated in politically and environmentally fragile states. Whereas historically, development actors have left humanitarian workers with difficult conflict places, now development and humanitarian actors work side by side because of this overlapping fragility. People living in these countries are disproportionately reliant on aid for basic needs.

Getting aid to work in conflict situations is not easy, because these interventions almost by definition go against the cultural tide in the country they are trying to help. Also, there are boundaries within the aid industry itself. For instance, humanitarian action and development aid were first active in relatively separate zones, and now they are forced together. But they start from very different perspectives, with different analyses of the context, and with different ways of working. Development actors, for instance, focus on bilateral or multilateral relations with a central role for the state: When you look at dominant paradigms in the World Bank, the state is important for economic development and economic growth. That, however, is not the business of humanitarian workers, who are much more driven by a fundamental duty to protect and support individuals.

Quick overview of the history of “linking thinking”

Linking Thinking 1.0 (during the 1980s and 1990s) was mostly related to natural disasters. Researchers started taking on the problem-based approach and pointed at disaster risk reduction: development aid should (help) prevent the risk of natural hazards turning into natural disasters. This approach took some time to become mainstream. Now we see this is an accepted part of the development agenda in the context of building resilience against climate change. The European Commission’s Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development policy (1996) was an important effort to translate this thinking into practice.

Back in the 1990s, development actors focussed on long-term development rather than supporting people to (re)build their livelihoods or ‘just’ feeding them. In protracted crises this was translated into quick investments in development, as a fundament for state and peace building.

Linking Thinking 2.0 (after 2000): As soon as the 9/11 the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and other American targets, that benign context changed. A new generation of “linking thinking” started to emerge, intricately linked with the war on terror. There was much more acceptance of the idea of linking not only humanitarian aid and development, but also political objectives. There was an increasing importance of the state and peace-building agenda. Humanitarian workers, nevertheless, know that political failure is the reason why they see such horrific sites, and they are probably more concerned than anybody else to see a solution to this. The question was whether or not aid could help in finding solutions.

What are the lessons?

The central issue when humanitarian thinking and development thinking come together, but are at the same time opposed to one another, is how to deal with problem states. Humanitarian workers want to position themselves as far away as possible from states because of neutrality. The majority of humanitarian actors see state actors as part of the problem, not as part of a solution. They rather work with non-state actors or local government actors.

Development actors have limited understanding of impartiality and neutrality. The argument that comes back is that working around the state might not be the way to sustainable development. At the same time, it is fair to say that humanitarian workers often talk very strongly about principles, but we see that there are variable levels of durability of these principles. Sometimes, humanitarians are even accused that they are hiding behind the principles. In the meantime, there is limited cross-learning.

The third lesson is that there was very little innovation by NGOs in terms of the rules, financing arrangements, and bridging the cultures between humanitarian and development organizations. Another remarkable observation is that the debate tends to be driven much more by humanitarian actors than by development actors.

The fourth lesson is that creating more sustainable outcomes for people living in humanitarian crises is very context specific. One of the difficulties is that the way that aid is organized now forces us into a binary mode, with not a lot of space to work empirically to see what the best tools are in a specific context.

What does this mean for Linking Thinking 3.0?

The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 was building on the big climate change debate on one hand, and the emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the other hand, which refocused on those most left behind. There is an alignment of language that said that the incentive is now right to be thinking about this again. The climate debate is saying that humanitarian crises are only going to get worse. The WHS pushed the idea of collective outcomes, which is a way of trying to start a move towards an approach that is more outcome driven and problem driven than aid instrument driven.

In Linking Thinking 3.0 (after the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain in 2016) there are some opportunities. Now, the incentives for stronger links between humanitarian action and development aid are much better aligned in donor administrations to fix fragile states. Mainstream development actors realize that 'business as usual' in how to deal with problem states is not working. For instance, in South Sudan, where the government is not a reliable actor, the World Bank is taking responsibility for allocating a lot of public finances, including many humanitarian actors. These are realizations of development actors questioning their ways of working, albeit very slowly.

A third big opportunity is the new programmatic tools, for instance cash, which are cutting across the humanitarian development divide. Both can talk comfortably and increasingly work together.

The need for a new set of principles; and joint analyses of the situation

Gerrit-Jan van Uffelen, independent consultant & lecturer in Disaster Recovery Management at Van Hall Larenstein University

There's a renewed interest in "linking thinking", but the debate has been going on for the last three decades. What this highlights is a systemic response failure: We as practitioners, policy-makers and donors might see this as an issue that needs attention, but in the field, the systemic response that we are framing does not connect well to local realities. It is there that aid efforts are often less effective and efficient than we want to see them. Linking thinking is very much about us, and about the systemic response. But if you flip it around and look at local communities and their needs and their realities, there is a disconnect.

We know of course that humanitarian assistance and development aid is compartmentalized; we work in silos, which is a huge issue. Why is the triple nexus back¹ on the agenda? It says a lot about us as interveners and our political interests and how that drives the debate.

Key issues that come out of the paper are the architecture of external assistance, where we see the challenge of addressing consequences and structural causes of something. And the key in this is principles: What are the principles of engagement in crises? What is essential in a new set of principles that can work in protracted crises and conflicts? A start has in fact been made with that. I also think that there is the momentum, and I'm happy you highlight that in your paper. Something is going on. There is space for critical reflection and it's important to capture that. So, let's take that opportunity. Now is the time to rethink linking thinking.

It is important to think of the developmental space too, particularly when development actors are also moving into fragile situations and situations of conflict.

¹ The nexus focuses on the link between humanitarian and development aid. The triple nexus is about linking humanitarians, development workers and peace builders.

Politics are an important element of the analyses of Joanna Macrae. But who owns the politics? Whether we like it or not, who makes what money available has to do with politics and with agendas. Money has to be aligned with global interests and agendas, as well as with regional and national agendas. In some countries we see new actors emerging, like the Chinese in South Sudan. It's a different ballgame, and we need to take that into account. Macrae points at the state, the government and the development actors. In my opinion, there's a difference between the representation of state: local or national. Local governments are often very aware of the needs and situation, and it is easier to engage with them. Humanitarian actors try to engage with local governments. We have to look at different levels and see how we can engage.

Macrae discusses the poor practice of humanitarian organizations. I think that's also an element we need to take seriously. The work pressure among humanitarians is high; they are overburdened. The quality of their work is under pressure because of a number of factors: there is competition; money is on the increase; and capacity to deliver is sometimes challenged.

One of the elements that I saw as a key element, in combination with context-specific interventions, was the issue of collective outcomes. You can only talk about a collective outcome if you also have a collective understanding of the situation. That starts with an analysis of a situation in a country. What is our collective understanding as different actors? Here is room for huge improvement. I can see that there is no common understanding of the situation in terms of collective outcomes, or the collective understanding of what the situation is, what the causes are, and what a future perspective is.

Personally, I think it starts with the realities of local communities and how our systematic response can connect better to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of assistance, whether it's humanitarian, development, peace, or all at the same time.

Mandates are discussed and overstretched, but we miss a common platform for mutual debate

Inge Leuwerink, expert in emergency preparedness and humanitarian aid with Cordaid

The nexus became a shorthand for lots of things. Some of my colleagues think it's about integrated programming. I think we should clarify what we are talking about. We are talking about coherence, complementarity and collaboration. We are talking about different interventions. We do not need to mix up to create a different thing. Instead, we need to find complementarity in the different interventions that are already being made.

Another main issue is to clarify what brought the nexus to the top of the agenda (again). Why the nexus? Why is the nexus so driven by humanitarians? I feel this starts with the needs of beneficiaries. The mandate of humanitarians is to deliver humanitarian aid, but in protracted crises, growing demands are being put on humanitarians. We see humanitarians go beyond their mandate to meet the needs they are confronted with. The reason humanitarians want the nexus is because they want development actors more on board to do these jobs. An example is in South Sudan, where development actors have been present for years, but during a new crisis, they freeze. And relating to what Joanna said: Development actors should challenge the idea that development efforts could and should be government-led. Development actors say, "We can't work with the government of South Sudan because the budget is spent on weapons". There are also many other actors, and development actors have to engage with other actors.

Joanna Macrae puts a strong focus on the different perspectives and different ways of working among humanitarians and development actors. That is a known distinction, and my question would be: How much does this matter? We don't need to have the same approach or the same perspective, but we need to be able to understand each other and see how we can talk about complementarity. This is about trying to find each other, but there may be other drivers that pull us apart. For instance, different areas where we are working, or different time scales, or different donor requirements. An example from the CAR: At a certain moment there was a new crisis. My organization helped development work in the CAR and we also did humanitarian work. So, the humanitarians were also running and providing the services, keeping minimal services floating. Then our health department said: 'No, we need to keep the services going', and they were asking humanitarians for money. Keeping minimal services floating is, however, not a humanitarian mandate, so ECHO indicated they could not put money in the health sector. We had a big discussion within our organization, between the humanitarians and the health department, about how to deal with this situation: What money goes where? I feel that if development money could at least continue to keep those basic systems going, that would already be a huge step.

I do realize that we sometimes speak very theoretically, because there is only so much you can do in certain situations. Sometimes there is not enough space to do certain activities; you just need to rely on humanitarian aid, because the situation is too challenging to make other interventions. We just have to deal with this situation and should spend too much time at the drawing table. But programmatically, there is space to see what can be done. Can development workers remain on board, instead of freezing and pulling back? Because then the development gains will again be lost.

Finally, about these different perspectives. I recognize a lot of that. Development actors say that humanitarians sometimes seem to engage, but do not to engage. That's a good point. I think it is important for humanitarians to better explain how much we can engage and relate to principles, and better explain the principles. Sometimes there are still issues there. I do understand that there is sometimes a tendency to hide behind principles. But there lies a chance for development actors to question us and have a debate. One of the things I see is that people are willing to engage, but what is the platform? There's a bit of nexus talking there and a bit of nexus talking there, but it doesn't come together because there's no platform for the joint risk analysis and planning. So that was flagged as a challenge. So very practically, we need to see how we can make sure that we really have the platforms to do this and force different actors to really do that risk analysis.

Open discussion

Silos

A recurring theme in the discussion was the acknowledgement of the different aid sectors working in silos. The silos were recognized, but the silos are not connecting. How can we make those conversations cross sectoral? That needs constructive engagement. We need to work together and learn together in a collective learning trajectory.

There also needs to be a conversation about money. Different funding streams, managed by different people, is an incentive to maintain the schism between humanitarian aid and development. This needs to be reorganized. Now, efforts related to the nexus get a pushback from the system, and that does not allow for a good coordination between development and humanitarian aid. It forces

organizations to choose between the two. Unless the broader architecture changes, it is difficult to find that space. If you have a new minister who is open to doing things differently, Joanna Macrae advises us to seize this opportunity.

For the UN it is going to be really tough to reorganize itself this way. But we can have this discussion with donors. Donors can keep feeding the UN (but delivery will be pretty slow), or donors can start to invest more in NGOs much more directly. The World Bank is worth watching because it has a lot of money but it has issues spending it in these difficult places.

Beyond the Nexus

Joanna Macrae envisions what she would do as head of an NGO to tackle the issue. She would market herself as the kind of beyond-the-nexus organization. This would not be humanitarian or developmental but specialized in those people that are most left behind in most difficult spaces. That would be my mission. I would make sure to have a robust analysis that measures the quality of humanitarian and developmental space, and then draw on a range of expertise in order to deliver that vision. That would look like a combination of people who are first responders, experts in dealing with acute issues, people who think about the strategic interventions that you can use to keep the minimum levels of systems functioning. Such an organization could tap into the money of multi-humanitarian finance. Such an organization has the analytical tools that provide the basis for collective analysis, which is driven to deliver the core SDGs. She would invest much more in developing efforts that show whether it is only possible to reach those most in need or whether there is more space, and if so, what is the quality of that space to take some broader steps? Be very careful with language because you do not need to say whether it is humanitarian or developmental. And then identify those programmatic tools that you have that are really good bridges. Cash is a good example. The biggest gap is probably in relation to livelihoods.

Cordaid is already working in the triple nexus with such a vision. Cordaid is also already working on different sources of funding. For Inge, it is not about an NGO having this vision, but about how we work with different actors. The collaboration with different kinds of actors is what is interesting, international actors as well as local. What is the problem that we can only solve together? It is a matter of whether it is a coalition of the needed. There is a push back from the system. We see there are different ways of working emerging, but the systemic change remains difficult.

Beyond the nexus - Language

Joanna Macrae thinks that part of the problem with the nexus is maybe in the language we use. Her advice is to stop talking about the nexus altogether. The brand of that conversation is contaminated. We should start talking about a collective aid effort. If that's the mission of aid organizations, then what are the principles that we can use collectively? We should stop talking about impartiality and neutrality and start talking about what we really mean by it, such as allocating in terms of need. Her understanding of neutrality is to not support a specific political outcome but to support the people and adopt a neutral position. But this is inherently difficult for development actors to do this because its inherent incentive was to support the state. I find it worrying that the development sector would not find it problematic to give money to the government of South Sudan. We can only collaborate if

politicians can provoke a change of culture on the development side. It would be interesting to sit down with the head of UNDP or the head of the World Bank and find out what their intentions and considerations are when allocating resources. If the intention is to maximize the impact of reducing poverty, that would imply that they target resources to the most vulnerable. This has not really been processed in common language. For instance, this is visible when we talk about dual mandate organizations. These organizations still have a single mandate, which is to help poor people. Calling these organizations dual mandated shows that separation between humanitarian and developmental is very intrinsic. Big NGOs can model these changes. And the climate space is a fourth community that is not very well connected either.

Participants indicate that we should try to use language as a way to engage the government more. Another suggestion is to align with the nexus working group within DHS about the framing of the nexus and how to move it away from this framing towards framing it in terms of effectiveness. The nexus should be seen as a means, not an end.

Opportunities

Participants gave multiple examples of what is being done already: The United Nations are brokering cross humanitarian-development analyses in countries like Chad and Syria. They are trying to specify collective outcomes and think about how their contributions can help to deliver them. What becomes quite interesting is if you break it down geographically you end up with a division of labour.

Oxfam shared the example of the Nexus Platform in Somalia, a platform of nine core members of local and national NGOs, Oxfam active on innovation, and Save the Children active on organization development. The two INGOs will be phased out over the years. This platform acknowledges that individually we are unable to fill the gap between humanitarian aid and development; even double-mandated organizations cannot do that. That is how Oxfam is hopefully able to work across the nexus. It's locally led. Money is a problem, but there are meetings in Nairobi with potential donors. It's promising but no money has been assured yet.

Cordaid's entry point to this discussion was to work together on a new partner and alliance policy. Cordaid is there for a limited period of time, in domestic settings with a lot of stakeholders. The essence of the partner policy is how Cordaid relates in domestic settings to different actors. They had some categorization and criteria, which was a very useful entry point for reflection. You see what is there, the strengths and weaknesses and with whom you can work and with whom not. This makes it easier for a next step.

The EU Bêkou Trust Fund in the Central African Republic is worth mentioning: This fund encourages donors to come up with funding modalities that allow to cross boundaries and funding streams. This trust fund modality allowed for a flexible funding mechanism that accommodates funding from different kinds of modules, also in time, in terms of what comes first.

Gerrit-Jan van Uffelen shared an example of a famine-like situation in Somalia, related to Al-Shabaab. We saw that the system first lingered on as it was structured before. When the opportunity came up to explore how to do it in a different way, how then do we as humanitarian and development actors act upon it and demonstrate that it can be done in a different way? In Somalia, it had reasonable levels of success. There was the acknowledgement that it could work.