

Critical Issues for the Development Sector

Future Brief Series No. 1



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Introduction

A wide array of issues is currently demanding the development sector's attention, all of which seem to be of vital importance to safeguard and advance hard-won development achievements and make further progress in the future. This document, 'Critical Issues for the development sector', has been developed by Partos and The Broker to guide readers in their quest for knowledge and help them navigate the vast amount of information out there. To begin this endeavour we have identified five of the most pressing issues for the future, of which the following four will be dealt with in this paper: 1) Data and digitalisation; 2) Climate crisis; 3) Civic space; and 4) The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus in protracted conflict settings. The fifth issue, on Shifting the Power, is elaborated in a separate Future Brief.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is there is no way we can know what the future brings. As the same holds true for these 4 issues, this brief should not be taken as prediction or foresight. Rather, for each of the topics, after a brief introduction, two key 'uncertainties' have been identified, followed by a number of promising pathways for action. The final section of this brief entails the main takeaways that emerge from discussing the five issues, closing with a list of relevant resources that can help continue your learning journey.

This future brief builds on and seeks to provide input for the work of Partos, its members, their partners and other development practitioners. The most important activities of Partos vis-à-vis the 'Critical issues' and how to deal with them include:

- [Learning, Innovation, Communication, Representation, Lobby and Advocacy](#)
- [Learning and Innovation Programme](#), that both stimulates innovation and addresses emerging challenges
- [Future explorations](#)
- [Act, Counteract or Transform](#)
- [Podcast series](#)
- [Partos Innovation Festivals and Awards](#)
- [Community of Practice and Publications about Shift the Power](#)

1. Data and digitalisation



Digitalisation – the introduction of new technologies and the use of big data – and the increasing availability of digital data are creating a hyperconnected world, touching every aspect of our lives. For the development sector, current and emerging technologies are equipping civil society with new tools to boost their impact (see for example these [33 inspiring cases](#) from Dutch development practice). Able to connect with people on a scale that was previously impossible, organisations can now mobilise greater support and use the digital realm to combat exclusion and protect human rights. Additionally, new technologies are increasingly used for social applications.

In [India](#), for example, a biometric population database was used to enable people below the poverty line to access welfare services with an iris or fingerprint scan and to help informal workers link up to the formal economy without having to go through a lengthy and often costly bureaucratic process. Yet, despite such advantages, data and digitalisation can also bear significant risks. For example, that same database employed to service the Indian poor, was [unable to authenticate](#) people working with stone, cement and limestone or some people with disabilities because they had no fingerprints; nor could it register malnourished people – their irises were not scannable – or those without a formal ID, like migrant children or refugees. In this way, the system perpetuated or even deepened social inequality.

This example shows that, given the relative novelty and fast changes of digital technologies, the future challenges and opportunities for the development sector are both uncertain and numerous. The following section presents two key uncertainties, raising readers' awareness of the risks and opportunities, and current and upcoming debates. Thereafter, some promising pathways for action are presented, to help the development sector harness the advantages of emerging technologies and better manage their risks in the future. Finally, an overview of useful resources is presented to guide you further in this quest.

1.1 Future Uncertainties

Future uncertainty 1: Bridging the digital divide?

It is no secret that digitalisation is swiftly increasing our connectivity, but it does so in an uneven fashion, deepening existing inequalities or creating new ones. While around ninety percent of the population has access to the internet, social and information inequality continues to rise due to unequal material access (i.e. computer-usage related costs), divergences in digital skills and usage opportunities. These inequalities result in what has come to be known as the digital divide – the uneven distribution of access to or use of communication technologies.

As found in a recent [UNCTAD research](#), while the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated the uptake of digital solutions globally, “it has also exposed the wide chasm between the connected and the unconnected”, showing how people without digital access or skills are increasingly at a disadvantage.

Without targeted interventions to correct this uneven distribution, the internet and digital technologies will most likely strengthen rather than ameliorate existing inequalities – in the economic, social and political realms. The gender divide, for example, is also visible in the digital realm, with [40% of women in developing countries using the internet](#) compared to 49% of men (86% vs 88% respectively in developed countries).

Inequalities in terms of wealth and income, age and ability, and participation in the formal economy also affect – and, at the same time, are deepened by – individuals’ access to and use of new technologies and the internet.

If these growing digital divides are left unaddressed, digitalisation will turn out to be a curse rather than a blessing, as it will deepen inequalities and seriously hinder the capacity of development organisations to reach out to, mobilise and support the most marginalised. If addressed adequately, however, digital technologies can become instrumental in achieving sustainable and inclusive development.

Future uncertainty 2: Safety and justice in the digital realm?

When discussing digital security and privacy in relation to the development sector, two interconnected concerns in particular demand our attention:

- 1) the potential misuse of new and emerging technologies by state and non-state actors; and
- 2) the abuse of personal and aggregate data by those same actors.

In regard to the first issue, state and non-state actors have routinely exploited new technologies to silence, surveil and manipulate civil society and digital activists, as well as to express and disseminate extremist views or hate speech. This became particularly visible at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: A number of governments rolled out or extended surveillance programmes, in the belief that consistent monitoring would restrict people's movements and, by extent, the spread of the virus.

Beyond the misuse of technological tools, state and non-state actors have also mishandled personal and aggregate digital data. Most relevant for the development sector, if sensitive aggregate data – such as the location of informal settlements or refugee routs – is improperly handled, there is a grave danger that they will end up in the hands of ill-willed actors.

In a recent example, the UN refugee agency improperly collected and shared ethnic Rohingya refugees' personal information with the Bangladeshi government, which then shared it with Myanmar to verify whether people qualified for repatriation. Misuse or misplacement of data and infringement upon people's privacy is further exacerbated by the current business models of technology companies. Their lack of sufficient protection measures often present risks to data protection, algorithmic bias, discrimination and infringement of privacy – as such, undermining the safety and security of online civic spaces.

1.2 Opportunities for action

Development organisations can play an important role in mitigating the digital divide and contributing to data privacy and justice. Some promising initiatives and developments that provide inspiration for future action include:

The development of the 'data justice' concept

As it is widely held that the proper use of digital data, and new computational algorithms, can promote sustainable global development, they are gaining more prominence in development strategies and programmes. At the same time, development is also built around the idea of 'justice'. At the intersection of these two notions emerges the concept of data justice: 'fairness in the way people are made visible, represented and treated as a result of their production of digital data'. For the development sector in particular, the notion of data justice will be of vital importance. Privacy and data protection, for development workers and the people they seek to support, can be a matter of life and death, especially when working on sensitive topics, under repressive regimes and/or in fragile contexts. What sort of rights should a refugee maintain over her own data? What happens when you take biometrics from a baby in Sub-Saharan Africa, so that you can track how many times they've been vaccinated and where? These and other questions are currently being investigated by pioneering experts – most notably dr. Linnet Taylor – in an attempt to identify pathways for future ethical frameworks and policies.

Learning from the private sector

As private sector actors are often quite some steps ahead in the digitalisation trajectory, learning from their experiences would be highly useful for the development sector. The World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) has developed a Digital Inclusion Benchmark (DIB), by means of which it is identifying and putting the spotlight on companies currently leading the way in fostering digital inclusion, while at the same time seeking to hold underachieving companies accountable. The WBA's insights on digital inclusion so far – the complete overview of which can be found in a first synthesis report – also include some valuable lessons for the development sector:

- 1) basic digital literacy programmes is a particular area in which much progress must still be made to leave no one behind in a digital world;
- 2) ethical issues that emerge in the digital realm demand urgent attention, especially to protect more vulnerable groups and individuals;
- 3) protecting children online worldwide, by raising awareness and attracting resources to deal with the problem, demands immediate, cross-sectoral attention. As the WBA will be tracking progress and showcasing inspiring examples from the private sector in the coming two years, development actors stand to benefit from keeping an eye on the DIB, learning from the progress and experiences of tech companies and, where possible, seeking out collaboration to formulate better and more efficient programmes for digital inclusion.

Co-creating digital solutions

Using digital technologies for sustainable development will not work if they are imposed upon Southern organisations and communities as something inherently useful and necessary to make progress. Most of the new technologies are developed in and for the global North and, consequently, do not necessarily match with the needs and interests of communities in the global South. The potential of new technologies cannot fully be tapped into without creating technological solutions with the people they are supposed to serve. Co-creating digital technologies for development means involving Southern organisations and communities from the very start, ensuring that the tools serve their specific interest and needs. In many cases, successful co-creation must include, or be preceded by, a level of digital capacity building – including education and material support.

To learn more...

- Listen to the 7th episode of Partos' Future Exploration podcast; a conversation with Marie-Louis Wijne on digitalisation for development: <https://www.partos.nl/activiteit/podcast-serie-the-partos-future-exploration/>
- Explore the Partos Digital Journey to accelerate the digital transformation of the Dutch Development Sector: <https://www.partos.nl/publicatie/the-digital-journey/>
- Read about creative civic activism in the digital realm: <https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Digital-Dalits-Colourful-Carrocas-Civil-society-action-for-inclusion.pdf>
- Learn from UNICEF's experience on how to co-create digital solutions with girls: <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7791/file/How%20to%20co-create%20digital%20solutions%20with%20girls.pdf>
- Learn from Global Data Justice about issues that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://globaldatajustice.org/covid-19/>

2. Climate crisis



On 9 August 2021 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report was published. It confirmed and went beyond what many already knew and feared: climate change is primarily the result of human activities, it is widespread, rapid, and intensifying, and some trends are now irreversible. Human influence has warmed the earth at an unprecedented rate and affects all major climate system components.

If we do not take immediate action, the climate crisis will only deepen, with the most vulnerable people suffering most of the impact. WorldBank estimates show that the climate crisis, if not turned around, will push some 132 million people into poverty over the next 10 years, nullifying hard-won development gains.

Additionally, the WHO estimates that from 2030, an additional 250,000 deaths will be caused by climate-sensitive diseases (e.g. heat stress, malnutrition, dengue and malaria), affecting the poorest countries and people, who are the most exposed and vulnerable to their impacts.

Considering that, as written by the UN, “the impacts of climate change will not be borne equally or fairly, between rich and poor, women and men, and older and younger generations”, it is imperative – for the global community and for the development sector in particular – to focus on the idea of ‘climate justice’. This notion implies that the climate crisis is addressed in a way that takes a human rights approach, dividing the burden not equally but equitably and offering extra support to vulnerable populations.

The following sections highlight two particular uncertainties central in this process, and thereafter offer some recommendations for action to better anticipate and adjust to the implications of our changing climate and contribute to a just transition towards a more sustainable future.

2.1 Future Uncertainties

Future uncertainty 1: Adaptation or mitigation?

When it comes to addressing the climate crisis, two different strategies can be distinguished: adaptation and mitigation.

Adaptation looks at how to reduce the negative effects of climate change and how to take advantage of any opportunities that arise. Mitigation, by contrast, is aimed at tackling the causes and minimising the possible impacts of climate change.

Taking one of these two approaches, however, will not be sufficient to address climate change. Only a combination of adaptation and mitigation strategies can yield the impact needed to turn back the tide.

Adaptation strategies are usually seen as a local, private good that often comes with clear and immediate positive effects. Mitigation, by contrast, is considered a global, public good with long-term benefits.

It may come as no surprise that policymakers often opt for the former solution. Yet, keeping in mind the idea of climate justice, should the wealthier countries, with their comparatively greater resources and their larger negative contributions to climate change, not take the responsibility to invest more in mitigation efforts? Without doing so, not only will the global South keep taking on most of the burden, but future generations will also be suffering the consequences of present-day lack of action.

For the development sector it is imperative to be aware of the two strategies and to incorporate both approaches, preferable in tandem, in their programming.

This means supporting Southern partners and communities in their fight to mitigate climate change, while at the same time providing help to adapt to the changing circumstances and limit the negative consequences.

Whether (Northern) governments will commit to climate justice – and, hence, invest in both mitigation and adaptation strategies – remains uncertain. Beyond lobbying for fair and equitable climate policies, the development sector can set the right example and work towards increased resilience of local communities.

Future uncertainty 2: How bad will it get?

When talking about climate change, we are, de facto, talking about an uncertain development. It is generally agreed that things are bad and, without immediate action, will get worse. But just how bad they will get, and whether we are not already too late is open for debate.

With regards to the future of our climate, there are pessimists and optimists. As Anders Nordgren explains, this diversity of pessimistic and optimistic views can be explained, in part, by political ideologies but also reflect a real uncertainty of scientific climate models. Climate change is a non-linear, dynamic process, depending on many factors, which means that models are imprecise and allow for a variety of interpretations and predictions.

Whether or not the pessimists or the optimists turn out to be right, what is clear is that the climate crisis is far from over, is likely to deepen and may or may not be resolved. Development organisations will have to accept this uncertainty, act upon the best information out there, whilst avoiding falling into the trap of extreme pessimism: This view – whatever we do, we are too late – may cause actors to become paralysed and do nothing at all. No matter how bad the climate crisis will get – whether things turn out worse or better than expected – what is certain is that the most vulnerable communities, especially in the global South, will need support to become more resilient and not fall deeper into poverty.

2.2 Opportunities for action

For development organisations to contribute to combating climate change-related inequalities and fostering greater integration of adaptation and mitigation efforts, some future pathways are particularly promising:

Lobby for climate mitigation efforts

Able to voice the concerns of communities across the global – including the most marginalised – civil society and development organisations are particularly well placed to apply pressure to both governments and companies to reduce their CO₂ emission levels and increase their other efforts towards climate mitigation. The work of Milieudefensie constitutes an inspiring example in that regard: after protracted lobbying efforts, the organisation, along with 17,000 co-plaintiffs, took legal action against multinational oil and gas company Royal Dutch Shell. The Dutch courts ruled that Shell must reduce its CO₂ emissions by 45% within 10 years, setting international legal precedent for further action on the topic.

Invest in climate resilience

Multiple examples can be found of development organisations working towards climate resilience in their projects and programmes. Recognising that the poorest countries and people are most vulnerable to the consequences of the climate crisis, climate resilience seeks to “strengthen the capacity [of communities] to 1) anticipate climate risks and hazards, 2) to absorb the impact of shocks and stresses and 3) to reshape development pathways in the longer term.” Thus, projects focusing on climate resilience combine adaptation and mitigations strategies and also incorporate a broader development perspective. Building climate resilience becomes all the more important when one considers the findings of the OECD that “with strengthened climate resilience, people and communities will also be more resilient to other types of risks, for instance, those that are economic or health-related in nature.” Frontrunner in this regard is emergency relief and development organisation Cordaid, which has incorporated climate resilience as a core element of its broader resilience programming.

Fight for climate justice

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction of this section, one promising pathway for action centres around the concept of climate justice. Not only the causes and effects of the climate crisis are unevenly shared but current policies also tend to favour the rich and put an additional burden on the poorest. As Donald Pols, director of Friends of the Earth Netherlands (Milieudefensie) eloquently puts it in a Podcast episode of the Partos Future Exploration: “Climate policy can exacerbate existing differences and inequalities. [...] To give you an example; the climate policy in the industrialised countries already have a strong element of transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich and this could be replicated in developing countries if we are not careful.” To build a more sustainable and equitable future, it is thus vital for development organisations to address these unequal policies, in lobby and advocacy campaigns to their own governments, as well as in programmes that serve to amplify the voices and build the capacity of local actors to demand climate justice.

To learn more...

- Listen to the 9th episode of Partos’ Future Exploration podcast; a conversation with Donald Pols about climate justice: <https://www.partos.nl/activiteit/podcast-serie-the-partos-future-exploration/>
- Watch a recording of the session on climate justice during the 2021 Partos Innovation festival with Nisreen Elsaïm, Kumi Naidoo and Donald Pols: <https://youtu.be/hG5VyTWxMso>
- Draw inspiration from the ‘Amplifying Voices for Just Climate Actions’ programme to integrate climate justice in your programming: https://www.wwf.nl/globalassets/pdf/full-programme-proposal_amplifying-voices-for-just-climate-action_web-version.pdf

3. Changing civic space



Civic space is the arena in which individuals and groups exercise their freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

An open civic space is, as described by CIVICUS, “the bedrock of any open and democratic society”. At present, however, according to the CIVICUS Monitor ratings, 114 countries have serious civic space restrictions.

This means that, in these countries, governments are not are not upholding their duty “to protect their citizens and respect and facilitate their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions”.

For development organisations, an open civic space is of crucial importance – for their own ability to carry out their work and for the local communities they seek to support. Faced with a severely obstructed or even closed civic space, the possibilities for development organisations to effectively contribute to sustainable and inclusive development also become very limited.

Civic space – shaped by individual citizens, civil society organisations and governments, as well as by big societal developments, including digitalisation and (political) conflict – is constantly in flux.

For some countries, the future of civic space is bleak, while in others, there is hope for civic space expansion. The global COVID-19 pandemic, however, has shown that big events may cause unexpected changes, as across the world governments adopted repressive measures to combat the virus resulting in severe curtailments of civic space.

This section discusses two future uncertainties related to the topic of changing civic space and identifies some promising opportunities for action to defend and expand civic space.

3.1 Future Uncertainties

Future uncertainty 1: The rise of powerful, repressive states

Several powerful, repressive states, most notably China and Russia, have had a significant role on the freedoms and safety of civil society, quashing civic space both domestically and internationally, not in the least via digital means. For example, in the wake of the pandemic, Beijing has intensified its global disinformation campaign to counter the fallout from its cover-up of the initial coronavirus outbreak, erased Hong Kong's special status and turned Xinjiang into a prison state.

Other governments have started replicating such strategies at home:

In India, for example, the government has encouraged the scapegoating of Muslim minorities, which were already blamed for the spread of the virus and faced attacks by vigilante mobs. Alongside state efforts to close civic space altogether, some governments are using more complex mechanisms to reconfigure it.

These governments employ a dual process to reorganise civic space: they inhibit organisations linked to or promoting liberal agendas from functioning, while at the same time leaving intact or enlarging civic space for organisations ideologically linked to the government.

In Poland, the Law and Justice party has launched targeted attacks against women's rights activists through raids and denial of funding, while working with likely-minded, conservative civil society actors, such as the Catholic church, to promote family and national values.

This trend does not bode well for CSOs across the world, and targeted, multi-stakeholder action will be needed to counter the restrictive (online) forces of repressive states.

Future uncertainty 2: Mis-informed, dis-informed, mal-informed... or informed civil society?

The widespread use of social media has created new possibilities for civil society action, allowing CSOs to build new relationships with other activists to access resources and collaboration opportunities.

The example of the Arab Spring is widely known: Without young activist networks using Facebook as a means to mobilise the crowds, the protests would not have had the enormous impact they did. Whereas back in 2011 digital civic space was not yet perceived as a great threat by most governments, since then social media platforms have gained fame and notoriety as important instruments for influencing the masses. The digital realm has proven fertile ground, not only for mobilising activists and promoting human rights and freedom; it is also used to spread mis-, dis- and mal-information. It must be remembered here that civic space is not a realm occupied by human rights defenders or development NGOs alone – right-wing populists and nationalists are also part of civil society. Especially in the digital space, this great diversity of state and non-state actors is able to share information, using it to advance their own interests. As such, information has been spread to ‘do good’ and fight for freedom and human rights, but also to create confusion and discord; attack civil society; and exclude groups and anyone who stands up for their rights.

In Brazil, for example, Jair Bolsonaro led a presidential campaign founded on the spread of misinformation via WhatsApp, misleading political debate in one of the world’s largest democracies. Once in power, Bolsonaro has kept using similar practices: when wildfires erupted in the Amazon, as a result of illegal logging and land grabbing activities, he first denied them and then baselessly blamed environmentalist NGOs for starting the fires on Facebook. Whether the digital civic space will become further infested with mis-, dis-, and mal-information, or whether mechanisms and strategies will be developed to create digital heavens where civil society can express and inform itself safely is, as yet, uncertain.

3.2 Opportunities for action

The uncertainties outlined above concern the global level: it is nearly impossible to estimate exactly which governments will be influenced by the rise of powerful, repressive states to become repressive themselves or in which countries mis-, dis-, and mal-information will be used and lead to marginalise CSOs. Yet, much can be done to defend and expand civic space for the future:

Collaborate across borders

By forming stronger bonds and alliances – across internal, national, international and sectoral divides to optimise their potential – civil society actors will be able to form a strong, united front to defend and expand the space within which it can operate. Lobby and advocacy efforts for civic freedoms; protecting and supporting marginalized groups and communities in the most severely restricted civic spaces; mobilizing support for action against civic space violations – all these efforts become easier and more forceful when civil society actors stand together. Collaboration can also strengthen civil society's ability to protect threatened CSOs, human rights defenders, independent journalists and lawyers. Seeking collaboration with other sectors – most importantly governments and the private sector, even if these actors operate in other countries – will be of crucial importance. In an increasingly interconnected world, breaking down siloes is the only way to achieve sustainable and inclusive development and to create safe and open spaces for all.

Protect actors and information in the digital civic space

To be able to plan ahead, adjust and respond to the changing environment, and to know where to focus one's actions, knowledge is indispensable. Exchange of knowledge, experiences and data will strengthen civil society as a whole as well as the individual organisations and people that are part of it. Gathering and sharing knowledge must also go beyond civil society circles. Sharing trustworthy information with communities as well as governments will help expand civic space. Today, much information sharing happens in the digital realm.

That is why, for development actors, it is important to develop strategies on safeguarding the digital civic space. The Digital Defenders Partnership (DDP) constitutes a promising example, offering support to human rights defenders under digital threat, and strengthening local response networks.

Plan ahead for possible scenarios

As the development of civic space depends on many factors, it may not be possible to determine what path is the most likely. In collaboration with partners – from civil society and beyond – it is therefore vital to prepare for multiple scenarios. CIVICUS has developed four scenarios to help CSOs navigate and adapt to the different scenarios and strategise for possible futures to come. These scenarios are built around two driving factors, the direction of which is uncertain: Governance systems (enabling or disabling) and avenues to resources (restricted or increased). Placed on a matrix, these two drivers result in four possible scenarios: 1) Civil society is surviving: enabling governance but restricted access to resources; 2) Civil society is marginalised: disabling governance and low capacity to adapt; 3) Civil society is controlled: disabling governance but increasing access to resources; and 4) Civil society is thriving: enabling governance and increasing avenues to resources. Against these four scenarios, CSOs can test their current strategies and realign them where necessary to increase their future resilience against forces that may limit their space and freedoms and capitalise on the opportunities the future may hold.

To learn more...

- Listen to the 3rd episode of Partos' Future Exploration podcast; a conversation with Lysa John and Barbara Oosters on civic space: <https://www.partos.nl/activiteit/podcast-serie-the-partos-future-exploration/>
- Discover Partos' journey through its Civic Space Platform: <https://www.partos.nl/werkgroep/the-civic-space-platform/>
- Read about contemporary events and trends in civil society and how civil society is responding to the major issues and problems of the day in CIVICUS' 2021 State of Civil Society Report: 2021 State of Civil Society Report
- Prepare for and navigate different future scenarios as well as create flexible and durable strategies with the CIVICUS Scenario Planning: <http://civicus.org/documents/CIVICUS-Scenarios-Final-March2021.pdf>
- Draw inspiration from creative activist around the world in 'Activism, Artivism and beyond', a publication by Partos & The Broker: <https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Activism-Artivism-and-Beyond-PDF-2017.pdf>

4. The HDP–nexus in protracted crisis settings



In early 2020, the Worldbank estimated that by 2030, up to two-thirds of the world's extremely poor people will live in countries impacted by protracted crises, marked by fragility, conflict and violence (FCV).

In such contexts, people are facing multiple shocks, including hunger and malnutrition, market disruption or even breakdown, outbreaks of diseases, and loss of human lives and resources.

As functioning state structures are often missing, non-state actors – including local CSOs, development and humanitarian organisations – constitute the primary sources of basic services and social protection. While humanitarian assistance offered in crisis situations is of crucial importance, it is limited in its ability to meet longer term needs of people and communities. Yet, if crisis situations last longer – which is expected for many of the countries currently facing FCV – these stop-gap, short term measures will not be enough.

What is needed, as advised in a 2019 IOM report, is a comprehensive approach that combines humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) resources to alleviate the needs of the populations and, in parallel, rebuild/strengthen state institutions at all levels.

With the Worldbank's bleak outlook for the decade to come, operationalising the HDP nexus will be a topic of utmost importance for the aid and development sectors. This section identifies two future uncertainties related to the topic of protracted crisis settings, to raise readers' awareness of risks and opportunities, current and upcoming debates, and equip them with some insights that will help foster stability and stronger governance structures.

4.1 Future Uncertainties

Future uncertainty 1: Towards a triple nexus approach?

The nexus approach was first developed in the 1980s, when practitioners were trying to link relief efforts with rehabilitation and development. In more recent years, the triple nexus approach, as envisioned in the SDGs and The New Way of Working, attempts to link humanitarian and development aid with conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Under this approach, all relevant actors are encouraged to work together and coordinate efforts to address the root causes of vulnerability, fragility and conflict, in order to build resilience. While in theory this approach is enticing and some key institutional funders are in support, meaningful implementation has proven trickier. Differences in normative frameworks pose a significant challenge. Development- and, to some extent, peace-actors pursue openly political agendas, including strengthening governance, national capacity and improving the economy.

Humanitarian assistance, by contrast, espouses the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles are important, as they allow humanitarian aid workers to remain operational in areas where development- and peace-actors may be kicked out (e.g. by repressive regimes) but may run counter to the values of development agencies.

Institutional incompatibilities – such as different time frames and lines of funding – and mismatches in skills and capacities may further complicate collaboration. Despite these hurdles, however, a recent ECDPM report eloquently brought home the importance of the HDP approach: “The ‘triple nexus’ between humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and development has become a critical component of international efforts [...] to tackle growing fragility trends and protracted conflicts globally. [It] brings valuable opportunities to change existing approaches and have a transformational impact on the ground.”

Future uncertainty 2: Working with the state?

The most recent addition of 'peace' to the nexus approach – previously it was a dual humanitarian–development nexus – draws attention to the need for and relevance of incorporating the state into the process. It remains to be seen, however, whether this collaboration with the state, especially in conflict settings, will not undermine the impact and objectives of the humanitarian, development and peace organisations involved.

In a [2019 discussion paper](#) Oxfam highlights the difficulties that come with involving the state in the HDP approach. States are not always able (or willing) to accountably and inclusively meet the needs of all their populations. “Balancing this reality with encouraging them to fulfil their obligations will be an ongoing tension at the heart of nexus programming.”

Additionally, it is pointed out that “increased state involvement also risks exacerbating current trends that concentrate humanitarian action in more easily accessible areas, which often results in more vulnerable groups being neglected.” Operating impartially in areas of insecurity may become very difficult for organisations if they are associated with the state. The triple nexus approach, which attaches great importance to (re)building state capacity and working with authorities, thus faces some uncertainties in the future.

Questions that will arise and demand critical reflection include: How can humanitarian organisations, for whom working with the state often contradicts their principles, be kept on board? At which stage of a project and how should a state be involved? What actors are to be involved if there is no clear state institution to turn to?

4.2 Opportunities for action

To make use of the complementary skills, networks and capacities of humanitarian-, development-, and peace-actors and the so-called triple-nexus approach seems very promising. Possible actions to continue or set in motion this process are:

Develop transition pathways for HDP nexus programming in fragile settings

Though the need to implement the HDP nexus agenda is evident, how to effectively do this in practice often remains elusive. Although there is no one-size-fits all solution to realise the nexus approach, research on the HDP nexus that looked at examples from practice has yielded important lessons that can guide a transition process. Combining the insights of this research with a 2019 OECD report, recommendations for action (and reaction) include: 1) Create or demand longer timeframes and flexible funding for humanitarian-development programming in fragile settings; 2) Ensure early and continued engagement in crises by development actors; 3) Ensure cross-sectoral collaboration; in consortia and programmes but also within teams, creating a mixed staff with experience in humanitarian and development interventions; 4) In programme design, incorporate a strategy that makes explicit how interventions relate to a (future) transition between humanitarian, resilience, and longer-term development activities; 5) undertake joint analysis of the root causes of conflict, combining the expertise and unique networks of development, humanitarian and peace organisations.

Innovate, revisit and keep learning

As argued in the Oxfam discussion paper, multiple initiatives have seen the light of day that take a nexus approach, including those of CARE and ZOA. While these projects hold promise compared to previous attempts to better align aid initiatives, they have not been running long enough to evaluate their impact. It is, thus, of great importance to invest in evidence-based learning across HDP-nexus initiatives. Where the evidence of what works is weak, programmes and monitoring should be designed in a manner that is adaptive and promotes learning.

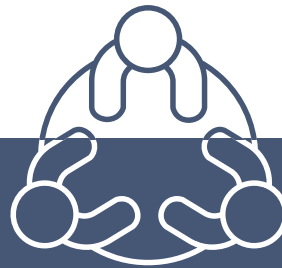
To learn more...

- Get your thoughts provoked in a discussion paper on the challenges and opportunities of HDP nexus programming:
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/dp-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-260619-en_0.pdf
- Draw lessons from research by The Broker on promising pathways for HDP nexus programming: <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/pathways-for-market-oriented-development-on-the-hdp-nexus/>
- Watch this video by the FAO to better understand the 'Peace part' in the HDP nexus: <https://youtu.be/oU45k07s7OI>

Key takeaways and resources

This future brief presented four development-related issues – data and digitalisation; climate crisis; changing civic space; the triple nexus approach in protracted crisis settings – which require the sector’s immediate attention. If left unaddressed, these issues could undo hard-won development gains and deepen already existing problems. This final section provides the reader with the key takeaways from the above discussion:

- **Inequality is a cross-cutting issue** that features prominently in discussions about data and digitalisation, and climate change. Taking action in these areas will indirectly improve existing inequalities but, if neglected, inequalities may be exacerbated or even created.
- **The role of the state in development initiatives constitutes another cross-cutting issue.** This became apparent, for example in discussing protecting or infringing data security and privacy; enabling or disabling civic space; and promoting or inhibiting successful HDP interventions. State actors play a complicated role in the international arena: they can constitute a necessary partner for progress or a repressive force in any of the four aforementioned issues.
- **There is a strong need for increased and improved cooperation as well as transcending silos in the aid architecture.** The sections on digitalisation, for example, clearly showed that cooperation between private (tech) companies and NGOs could be highly beneficial. The section on the triple nexus approach underlined that collaboration between humanitarian, development and peace actors comes with challenges but also promises great rewards if managed well.
- **Improvements on any of those issues are unlikely to materialise if civic space around the world is suppressed.** Development organisations need to be alert to the increasingly intricate mechanisms, including emerging technologies, used by states and non-state actors to suppress or remorph civic space to their liking.



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