

## Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reflection on the “Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus”

May 27, 2019

### I. Introduction

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an international, independent, medical humanitarian organization that delivers emergency aid to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, natural disasters and exclusion from healthcare. Founded in 1971, MSF’s actions are guided by medical ethics and the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Today, MSF is a worldwide movement of 28 sections in various offices and over 40 thousand health professionals, logistical and administrative staff work on programs in over 70 countries worldwide.

MSF provides humanitarian medical assistance to 4 key target populations: victims of (1) conflict, (2) natural disasters, (3) epidemics, and (4) healthcare exclusion. MSF’s interventions involve medical teams addressing the most urgent health needs of the people in crisis. MSF teams conduct independent evaluations to determine medical needs before deciding to open a program – we analyze what assistance we can provide and regularly question the pertinence of our presence or absence. We retain continuous and direct control over the management and delivery of our assistance for the duration of our activities.

As a private medical humanitarian organization, MSF does not consider itself a party to the policies articulated within the current “Humanitarian-Development (Peace) Nexus” discourse. In 2016, MSF withdrew from the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), expressing concern over *“an incorporation of humanitarian assistance into a broader development and resilience agenda”* and that it *“neglect(ed) to reinforce the obligations of states to uphold and implement the humanitarian and refugee laws which they have signed up to.”*<sup>1</sup>

However, MSF continues to support affected communities in many contexts where “Nexus” frameworks are being implemented or where planning to do so is underway. To the extent that Nexus policies and practices may potentially impact humanitarian action and the affected communities we are committed to serve, we have therefore followed developments as an independent humanitarian stakeholder.

MSF has noted increased level of interest and documents produced in Korea around the subject. As the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has noted,<sup>2</sup> the current Nexus discourse highlights that *“the volume, cost and length of humanitarian assistance over the past 10 years has grown dramatically, mainly due to the protracted nature of the crises and scarce development action in many contexts where vulnerability is the highest.”*<sup>3</sup> The discourse further asserted that *“artificially reinforced”* distinctions between humanitarian, development and peace-building action have acted *“at the expense of more long-term and peace-building/dialogue-oriented programs.”*<sup>4</sup>

While not fundamentally new in concept, we understand that the Nexus approach therefore seeks to substantially increase efforts to link humanitarian, development and “peace-building” (or “peace-sustaining”) action.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘MSF to pull out of World Humanitarian Summit’, MSF, 05 May 2016, available at:

<http://www.msf.org/en/article/msf-pull-out-world-humanitarian-summit>

<sup>2</sup> ‘Triple Nexus of ‘Humanitarian-Development-Peace’: Concept and Korea’s Strategic Positioning’, KOICA Briefing Paper, September 2018, available at:

[http://lib.koica.go.kr/bbs/content/4\\_3318](http://lib.koica.go.kr/bbs/content/4_3318)

<sup>3</sup> UN OCHA, ‘Humanitarian Development Nexus’, available at:

<https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>

<sup>4</sup> KOICA Briefing Paper, *op. cit.*

## II. Potential

Arguments around the Nexus may be well-intentioned, and MSF has indeed long-observed that “development action has too often been missing in difficult settings.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, according to the OECD DAC the global Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) categorized as “Humanitarian Aid” continues to be dwarfed by revenues allocated to other forms of assistance, including multilateral and bilateral development projects, programs, and technical cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

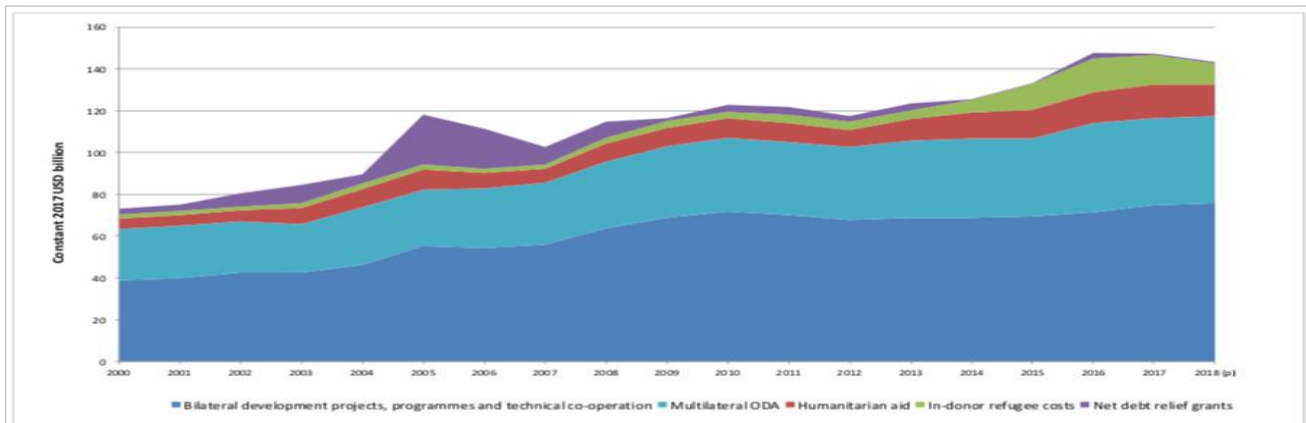


Figure 1. Components of DAC Countries' Net ODA (Humanitarian ODA in red)  
Source: OECD, April 2019 (2018 data is preliminary)

If framed correctly, the current Nexus policy shift brings potential to push development action outside the comfort zones into closer proximity and consultation with affected communities, into less-stable and fragile contexts, and into applying less risk-adverse, more rapid and flexible operational modalities as most relevant to affected communities.

MSF would welcome such developments as long as they are accompanied by robust and transparent monitoring, do not come at the expense of ensuring the survival, dignity and rights of affected individuals and communities, and do not further dilute accountability of parties to conflict and Member States in bringing to an end the conflicts that drive much of the human suffering today.

## III. Risks

It has been stated that it is not the intention of the Nexus to undermine humanitarian principles. Current formulation of Nexus policies do make such an outcome substantially more likely, however, and to-date MSF is not aware of effective measures to mitigate such risks. Discussions surrounding the Nexus have so far been complex, technocratic, heavily driven by donor capitals, and particularly vague on detail. Proponents have framed this as positive, stating that measures for implementation must be determined in a “context specific” manner at country-level.

This ambiguity has resulted in potential for interested parties to interpret the Nexus in accordance with their own interests rather than the objective needs of those furthest behind. Partially as a result, the positive potential of the “Humanitarian-Development” and “Humanitarian-Development-Peace” frameworks may be outweighed by the risks to the affected communities.

<sup>5</sup> M. DuBois, ‘The Cost of coherence’, MSF E-Gap Series, December 2016, available at:

[https://arhp.msf.es/sites/default/files/MSF\\_EGS04\\_The%20cost%20of%20coherence\\_december%202016\\_0.pdf](https://arhp.msf.es/sites/default/files/MSF_EGS04_The%20cost%20of%20coherence_december%202016_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, ‘Development aid drops in 2018, especially to neediest countries’, OECD, 10 April 2019, available at:

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/ODA-2018-detailed-summary.pdf>

## **Normative and perception-based risks**

Humanitarian, development, and in some cases peacebuilding action are critical components of international, national and local responses to many crises today. The distinction between these forms of action is not entirely artificial, but is rather derived from the specific purposes, objectives and *modus operandi* of each.

Humanitarian action, distinguished by its pursuit of the humanitarian imperative, principle of impartiality and necessarily supported by the neutrality and independence of humanitarian actors, is different in both function and form from development action, which seeks to transform economic and social contexts, and is implemented in conformity with national development plans and often explicitly with “member states in the driving seat.”<sup>7</sup> Peace operations may seek to work in different ways and at different levels of society, but in addressing causes or dynamics of conflict, peace operations are often perceived to be directly implicated in the conflict dynamics.

In signaling that humanitarian, development and even peace activities are by default part of a unified effort, the Nexus discourse risks confusing important distinctions in the eyes of those with whom humanitarian organizations must negotiate to access and support affected populations. It may lead to the impression among donor and host governments that good practice dictates humanitarian actors to prioritize their actions according to national development or foreign policy objectives, even where this does not align with the most urgent needs of the affected population.

In conflict zones, non-state groups who are parties to conflict are more likely to perceive humanitarian actors complicit in economic or stabilization efforts to which they are opposed. This risks further undermining already challenging negotiations to maintain impartiality, neutrality and independence of humanitarian action, and may contribute to degraded outcomes for affected communities.

MSF has noted the concerns regarding the risk of “instrumentalization” of humanitarian action in contexts such as Mali, for example, where recent “State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)” case-study identified strong incentives for national and foreign government actors to enroll humanitarian action in “stabilization” programming under the aegis of the Nexus. Despite serious concerns as to the implications for impartiality, neutrality and security of humanitarian action, a focus group indicated that NGOs nonetheless felt pressure to acquiesce to such programs as “*unfortunately, we do need the money.*”<sup>8</sup>

With its implication that “ending need” is possible merely by “breaking down silos” of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action, the role that the Nexus discourse may play in distracting from and relieving pressure on diplomatic action required to resolve protracted crises and ensure adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) should also not be under-estimated.

## **Operational risks**

The Nexus discussion also risks precipitating unintended outcomes at the operational level. Good humanitarian practice has long-recognized the imperative of ensuring that humanitarian action at minimum does not undermine and at best assists in the sustainable recovery and development of affected communities. By signaling that development outcomes are co-equal objectives of humanitarian action, however, the Nexus framework risks creating incentives for implementing organizations to compromise minimum standards in humanitarian assistance to meet performance indicators associated with development outcomes. Such incentives are reinforced by donor signaling and the messaging that Nexus outcomes must be achieved using “existing resources.”

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<sup>7</sup> ‘UN chief outlines reforms that ‘put Member States in driver’s seat’ on road to sustainable development’, UN News, 22 January 2018, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/01/1000931>

<sup>8</sup> ALNAP, SOHS 2018 Case Study: Mali, 26 April 2019, available at: <https://sohs.alnap.org/help-library/mali-case-study---sohs-2018>

MSF has witnessed early examples of this dynamic in Eastern Africa, in cases where resources have been deliberately reduced below acceptable standards explicitly to conserve for longer-term infrastructure projects, or where “capacity-building” modalities have been applied during emergencies that objectively warranted direct and urgent operational humanitarian response – arguably undermining relief outcomes for the most vulnerable.

In Northern Uganda, a Comprehensive Refugee Response Plan (CRRF) was cited by UN agencies as an early and successful application of the “New Way of Working” and Nexus concepts.<sup>9</sup> In at least one refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, however, water provision targets were subsequently reduced to 10 liters per person per day (well-below SPHERE minimum standards of 15 l/pp/pd and only half MSF’s standard of 20 l/pp/pd) explicitly to channel funds towards longer-term water infrastructure. Although intended as a “transition” measure, MSF found that in fact this target continued to be applied to refugees residing in settlements for months and even more than a year. MSF monitoring moreover estimated actual water consumption substantially below even this insufficient target for many vulnerable people.<sup>10</sup>

In Ethiopia, a “New Way of Working” and Nexus-based response to the devastating drought in Somali Region in 2017 channeled substantial humanitarian assistance through government mechanisms with the intention of simultaneously building national capacity and responding to urgent need.<sup>11</sup> MSF observed that the application of this response model without adequate safeguards contributed to broadly inadequate service provision at community level, compounded by a lack of monitoring or gap-filling by independent humanitarian actors. Amidst soaring malnutrition MSF was forced to scale-up its own operations as a result.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. The way forward: a responsible approach

The “Humanitarian-Development” and “Humanitarian-Development-Peace” Nexus approaches risk undermining emergency assistance to affected communities they aim to serve *unless* specific and concrete measures are taken to ensure that the framework is fit for purpose. Fortunately, such measures are well within the means of the international community.

Korea’s significant domestic experience and international contribution in both peacebuilding and sustainable development, its commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 of “peace, justice and strong institutions” and its status as a leading regional humanitarian donor are all indicative of the leadership role it may choose to take in helping support a “responsible” Nexus policy approach that best serves the needs of affected communities. Such an approach can include:

1. **Alleviating confusion by clearly and unambiguously re-stating, and then practically defending the specific meaning, objectives and *modus operandi* of humanitarian action.** This may begin with a public re-endorsement of instruments such as the 24 Principles of Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, Red Cross Code of Conduct and Humanitarian Charter as a matter of policy. At the practical level, it may extend to ensuring clarity and guidance to partner organizations and recipients of Korea’s support as to the clear, principled distinctions between humanitarian, development and peace programming as the source of their comparative advantage, accompanied by programmatic guidance and indicators to

<sup>9</sup> ‘IASC Snapshot: Uganda’s New Way of Working’, June 2017, available at:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/iasc-snapshot-ugandas-new-way-working>

<sup>10</sup> 2017 South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan’ (Updated Version of May 2017) P. 83, available at:

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017%20Revised%20South%20Sudan%20Regional%20Refugee%20Response%20Plan%20-%20Jan-Dec%202017%20%28May%202017%29.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> ‘The “New Way of Working”: Bridging aid’s funding divide’, IRIN, 09 June 2017, available at:

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2017/06/09/new-way-working-bridging-aids-funding-divide>

<sup>12</sup> ‘MSF sees tenfold increase in children with malnutrition in Doolo zone’, MSF, 26 June 2017, available at:

<https://www.msf.org/ethiopia-msf-sees-tenfold-increase-children-malnutrition-doolo-zone>

facilitate complementarity while safeguarding the distinct identity and *modus operandi* of each.

2. **Re-stating within Nexus discourse the primary responsibilities of Member States in “ending need” via diplomatic efforts to resolve protracted conflicts, and for ensuring universal adherence to the IHL and the International Human Rights Law.** Korea’s contribution in matters of peacebuilding, as one of the top 10 donors to the UN peacekeeping, present an opportunity to speak with authority in this regard.
3. **Championing the increased proximity, flexibility and efficacy of development action in complex and fragile context through its strategic multilateral and bilateral partnerships.** In doing so, it may demonstrate that effective development action is possible in dynamic contexts without blurring the lines or undermining the mandate of impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action.
4. **Committing to and leading a movement to reinvigorate a framework that ensures transparent monitoring, evaluation and accountability to affected communities in its support to humanitarian relief operations (including through Country-Based Pooled Funds).** This framework should require that minimum standards of assistance (as articulated in SPHERE and other quality assurance frameworks) are always met as a first priority in humanitarian contexts, and that no affected community is ever forced to sacrifice the immediate survival and dignity of their most vulnerable members at the sake of long-term prosperity.

## V. Contact

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