



## A REGION EMBATTLED: SITUATING THE TRIPLE NEXUS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC CONTEXT

*Reality of Aid - Asia Pacific*

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In recent years there has been considerable discussion about the triple nexus, also known as the Humanitarian, Peace and Development (HDP) nexus. The United Nations (UN), its member countries, especially donor countries clustered around the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as international civil society organizations (CSOs), and individual scholars and observers, have all been coming up with numerous papers and discussions on the topic.

What is the triple nexus? And what is its relevance to Asia and the Pacific region, particularly to situations of conflict and fragility in the area? How can it be viewed from the perspective of poverty eradication?

### **TRIPLE NEXUS: ORIGINS, DEFINITION, AND CRITIQUE**

The triple nexus is defined as the “interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions,” while the nexus approach “refers to the aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity” among the said three pillars:

*“The approach seeks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each pillar – to the extent of their relevance in the specific context – in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict.”<sup>1</sup>*

This idea can be traced to various developments in 2016: the launching of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to its adoption of “sustaining peace” as its conceptual framework for peace-building efforts; the holding of the World Humanitarian Summit to the birth of the *New Way of Working* and the *Grand Bargain* arising from this summit; and the statements of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the proposals of current UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The general idea focuses on the need to bring humanitarian, peace and development actors as close together as particular situations will allow in responding to contexts of conflict and fragility. According to key documents and statements on the triple nexus, the best strategy is to combine addressing immediate needs (the area of humanitarian actors) with addressing the long-term root causes of conflict and fragility (the area of peace actors, but primarily of development actors).

It is important to understand the context that explains why discussions about the interconnections among the three pillars (humanitarian, peace and development) are occurring. Discussions on the humanitarian / development continuum have been happening since the 1960s and 1970s, but are now being carried out at the top levels of the United Nations. First, there has been a major increase in demands for humanitarian assistance, as conflicts around the world, particularly those that are armed, have mounted to record-high levels in recent decades. Second, aid response to countries in extreme fragile contexts has

been primarily viewed from a humanitarian lens.

Another important background to these developments is the abiding focus by the UN and related organizations to areas and issues of conflict and fragility. This is considered crucial to the mandate of “leaving no one behind” and attaining the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Extreme poverty and various social and economic challenges are concentrated in these situations, and focusing on them will definitely improve global performance in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals for the 2030 Agenda.

Many commentators<sup>2</sup> on the triple nexus argue that while closer connections among the three pillars may be desirable overall, it is necessary to see how these connections actually play out in specific contexts of conflict and fragility. They maintain that the level, forms and mechanisms of interconnectedness are more meaningfully evaluated at this level.

Various concerns have been raised about the concept of the triple nexus. Among these are:

1. whether the triple nexus is consistent with the principles of humanitarian action that prize impartiality, neutrality and independence from peace, development and other actors;
2. whether addressing the root causes of the situations of conflict and fragility would really mean people-centered and sustainable development;
3. the need to ensure that the commitment to gender sensitivity and equality will actually be implemented at national and community levels;
4. whether the nature and level of CSO involvement in the triple nexus discourse and process will be respected;

5. if the impacts of donor countries' policies, especially security policies are outside the objectives of the triple nexus; and
6. whether the various challenges in implementation of the triple nexus can be

realized at global, national and community levels.

This chapter will explore these issues within the Asia Pacific region.

## RELEVANCE TO ASIA PACIFIC

Discussions on the triple nexus are reaching Asia-Pacific at a time of worsening conflicts and fragility in the region, as well as the intensification of phenomena that may aggravate these situations. The region is therefore an important arena for applying, studying and evaluating the triple nexus.

According to the UN's Global Humanitarian Review 2021, Asia and the Pacific is the world's most disaster-prone region, where three out of four people affected by disasters live. More than 25 percent of the world's current conflicts are also in the region. Violence has intensified in recent years and, as a result, refugees now number 3.2 million.<sup>3</sup> Likewise in West Asia/ MENA,<sup>4</sup> conflicts have become protracted and are even escalating in Syria, Yemen and Libya, generating more than 12 million refugees, some of whom have been displaced multiple times.<sup>5</sup>

According to the OECD's State of Fragility 2020 report, four out of the world's 13 countries considered to be extremely fragile contexts are in the Asia-Pacific region: Yemen, Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Iraq. Of the 44 other countries being studied for fragility, 11 are from the region: Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Tajikistan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Iran, and Cambodia.<sup>6</sup>

While Sub-Saharan Africa was ranked as having the highest aggregate fragility in 2019, this region was closely followed by three sub-regions in Asia-Pacific: Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to fragile contexts, many countries in the Asia-Pacific region are also sites of various conflicts. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020) reported that seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced armed conflicts in 2019: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Thailand. It also noted two important trends: increasing violence caused by ethnic or religious conflicts or both, and growth in international jihadist groups.<sup>8</sup>

At the international level, three factors are likely to have an impact on these Asia Pacific conflicts in the coming years:

1. The election of Joe Biden as US President;
2. The COVID-19 pandemic; and
3. Climate change

### ***1) The election of Joe Biden as US President and his foreign policy.***

Some observers maintain that Donald Trump, with his "Make America Great Again" rhetoric and promise, moved the US closer to being inward-looking and protectionist, described by some as "impatient unilateralism." But many also agree that Biden will probably reaffirm the US's aspiration to continue to be the world's leader in many spheres, under a veneer of "multilateralism." Changing US policy could include a more strategic stance and a possible return to its "Pivot to Asia" strategy, made more likely with the appointment of Biden's new Indo-Pacific coordinator, Kurt Campbell,

who was one of the proponents of Obama's approach to the Asia Pacific region.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, Trump's administration loosened US's grip in the region and allowed China to "rewrite the rules." Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership was significant as were his threats to withdraw troops stationed in Asia Pacific, alienating some of the US's key traditional allies such as Japan and South Korea. To effectively "re-pivot" to Asia, analysts think the US will require the support of its European allies and in that sense create a "Pivot to Asia with Europe."<sup>10</sup>

Establishment policy experts are pushing the Biden administration to adopt the global strategy for conflict and fragility that was crafted under Trump — the "US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability." This document is an outcome of the bi-partisan 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA).<sup>11</sup>

The Global Fragility Initiative aims to "stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent violence globally." In this scenario the US State Department would create a plan whereby the Initiative would lead foreign policy, diplomatic and political efforts, while the US Agency for International Development (USAID) would focus on development, humanitarian and non-security efforts with support from other US government agencies. The State Department has been mandated to create a 10-year plan for priority countries and regions which will contain "descriptions of goals, plans for reaching such goals, and benchmarks for measuring progress."<sup>12</sup>

The strategy's underlying objectives have been stated by US policy experts. While it aims to "address the drivers of conflict, such as human rights abuses, social and economic exclusion, corruption, and impunity," it also

aims to "realign US diplomatic, development, and defense efforts in a way that reduces instability in countries that are at risk of violent conflict and extremism, as well as strategically important to US efforts to counter China, Russia, and Iran."<sup>13</sup>

These objectives cohere with the USAID's pronouncement of a "transformation process" to orient its interventions towards integrity and support for electoral systems in fragile contexts<sup>14</sup>. This prospect sparks more doubt than assurance, especially considering USAID's dubious history in exerting political pressure against governments not necessarily aligned with its interests.<sup>15 16 17</sup>

Regardless, the US taking a more active role in Asia Pacific has the potential to derail prospects for peace due to "serious and sustained competition for influence in fragile states, and over fragile states policy" coming from "the West's competitors, notably China."<sup>18</sup>

Marc and Jones (2021) and Wesley (2021) have similar views on how the US can potentially act on its interests in Asia, ones which call for US unity with Western governments, Japan and multilateral agencies to counter the increasing economic and political power of China, Russia and new players. They forecast greater focus on:

1. Global powers' direct or indirect involvement in civil wars and political crises;
2. Global powers' investments in and financial support for fragile states that can undermine the latter's long-term sustainability;
3. Global powers' security arrangements and assistance that can weaken security and justice governance in fragile states;

4. Tensions in the UN and other global and regional bodies that can reduce international pressure to prevent violence; and
5. Ongoing tensions among global and regional powers that may diffuse global powers' efforts to focus on fragile states.<sup>19</sup>

## 2) The COVID-19 pandemic.

As early as July 2020, forecasts were being made on the potential for the COVID-19 pandemic to worsen and adversely affect existing conflict situations and states of fragility. Before the pandemic began, there were predications that global conflict would start to plateau in 2020 which would continue in the following years. The pandemic may change that scenario. In 2021, 13 new countries are expected to experience conflicts, a 56 percent increase from the previous forecast.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, 35 countries are predicted to face instability between the years 2020 and 2022, the highest number at any point in the past 30 years.<sup>21</sup>

There is a strong potential that the pandemic will have a devastating impact on fragile countries. Social distancing policies imposed by governments are likely to limit economic activity, causing demand and commodity prices to fall. This will decrease both individual livelihoods and government revenues. Countries dependent on food imports may experience shortages and higher prices. Increased poverty is certain and even famines are possible, with people calling on their governments to provide assistance. Depending on the response, some citizens may resort to violence and militancy, with governments reacting by restricting rights and carrying out repressive measures. Ruling elites may strive to maintain their hold on government given the economic challenges that they too will face.<sup>22</sup>

A September 2020 study by Mercy Corps<sup>23</sup>, warned against the following trends in various countries:

1. A weakening of social cohesion, defined as a shared sense of trust and purpose, and willingness to engage and cooperate, among members;
2. Deterioration of relations between the state and society;
3. The spread of misinformation and disinformation, which deepens misperceptions among groups and distrust towards government;
4. The rise and growth of armed groups that seek to fill the void left by weak governments and authority; and
5. Heightening economic scarcity and competition for resources.

For Asia and the Pacific, COVID-19 has brought "severe impacts on livelihoods, household income and poverty, food security, access to medical care for non-COVID-19-related concerns including maternal and child health care, and protection concerns including rising rates of sexual and gender-based violence and child protection."<sup>24</sup>

It is predicted that the region will require more humanitarian assistance. Responses have already been planned for Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Nepal. The need for humanitarian assistance is already high in the region. La Niña may affect Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Timor Leste which could mean floods, landslides, damage to crops and diseases — and therefore demand for humanitarian action. The situation is even worse in the Middle East, as millions already depend on humanitarian assistance for their basic needs and as health services are in shambles.<sup>25</sup>

### 3) Climate Change

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), climate change continued its rampage in 2020. The year 2020 is on track to be one of the three warmest years in history, and the past decade has already been identified as the warmest decade in history. Ocean heat is at record levels and atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses continued to increase, despite the COVID-19 lockdowns. The WMO report also notes that extreme heat, wildfires and floods, as well as strong hurricanes from the Atlantic, have affected millions of people.<sup>26</sup>

This does not bode well for situations of conflict and fragility. Climate change is recognized as a “threat multiplier both in the immediate and long term<sup>27</sup>” and as possible contributor to conflict and fragility.<sup>28</sup> Climate change and its effects can trigger greater competition over scarce resources, the reduction of economic opportunities and weakening of social cohesion, and the straining of social institutions and the public’s trust in government. Record-breaking natural disasters have already led to the displacement of tens of millions of people, who have lost their land and homes, jobs and livelihood, and access to food. All these effects

of climate change could push 132 million into poverty by 2030 if they are left unaddressed.<sup>29</sup>

Pacific island countries are a clear example of the “nexus between climate change, geographic isolation, and fragility.” These countries have ongoing social-economic problems because of meager economic opportunities, high youth unemployment and small and weak infrastructure. These difficulties are regularly compounded by tropical cyclones, flooding, droughts, volcanic activity and earthquakes. Pacific island countries often lose a significant portion of their GDP because of natural disasters<sup>30</sup>. As climate change effects compound, so will the number and intensity of natural disasters, bringing major consequences to the livelihood of islands’ population.<sup>31</sup>

Rising sea levels are also a critical situation confronting the Pacific islands, resulting from climate change. Hilda Reine, President of Marshall Islands, which has 55,000 citizens, said that “[By] 2030, we’re expected to be underwater. So, it is our livelihood, it is the very existence of the Marshall Islands that’s at stake.” Enele Sosene Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, claimed that “climate change represents the single greatest threat to the livelihoods of the people living on low-lying, vulnerable countries.<sup>32</sup>”

### CONCLUSION

In a study group on the triple nexus, Beverly Longid (2019)<sup>33</sup>, co-chairperson of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), presented CSOs’ take on the triple nexus and its pillars. In her view, the triple nexus goes beyond the issue of “coordination,” to create “a synergy of objectives, actions, and results,<sup>34</sup>” Indeed, the triple nexus means more than just interlinkages across the three pillars at the global, national and community levels. It is based on the conviction that long-term solutions to conflict and fragility must

be sought and found at the same time that immediate relief is being provided.

Longid’s clarification of CSOs’ views on the three pillars of the triple nexus is both important and timely<sup>35</sup>:

1. With regard to humanitarian action, actors should be critical of state perspectives and avoid the concentration of humanitarian assistance in areas that are accessible to the



state. Humanitarian aid should be used to combat extreme vulnerability and poverty.

2. Peacebuilding should be based on social justice and the reduction of wars and militarism. It should push for respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. It should oppose the increasing scope of anti-terror laws, as well as the criminalization of opposition or dissent. It should mean a stop to the rechanneling of ODA funds from poverty reduction to military spending.
3. In regard to development action, the triple nexus' objective of addressing the root causes of conflict and fragility, and thus ending the need for humanitarian assistance, means that development assistance should go into "relevant and people-centered development projects using a rights-based approach." This fits perfectly with Reality of Aid's concern for poverty reduction in development initiatives.

Superpower rivalries to intervene and control fragile states and situations of conflict can distort the implementation of the triple nexus in ways that are contrary to its intentions and vision. Under these circumstances, the worst fears of humanitarian actors can come true, where humanitarian action is subsumed by the particular interests of development and peace actors to the detriment of its nature, objectives and operations. Peace initiatives can mean the securitization of conflicts and fragility, and development efforts — in the context of superpower attempts to win over governments in the Global South to their side — can mean the classic problem of tied aid. These last

points deserve special attention as the triple nexus emphasizes the need to address the root causes of conflict and fragility over providing immediate relief.

CSOs working through the Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) have called on all actors to maintain their integrity "from states' security and geopolitical interests that could breed conflict<sup>36</sup>." Connected to this was CPDE's assertion that developing countries' should have ownership of development priorities against the impositions of global superpowers and regional powers.

The COVID-19 pandemic and impacts of climate change are bound to further increase demands for humanitarian assistance and action. Of course, these needs must be met in ways that uphold the principles of humanitarian action. At the same, the impacts of the pandemic and climate change, make peace action, more importantly development action, crucial and urgent. Addressing the root causes of conflict and fragility globally raises the possibility to also tackle the causes of the pandemic and climate change, and societies' vulnerabilities to these phenomena.

Asia and the Pacific — a major and growing arena of superpower contestations, a region that is severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, the site of many situations of conflict and fragility, and the home of many CSOs and social movements — will be an active subject intervening in discussions and actions with its experience on these topics.

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Meleh Al Shaer grows pumpkins on his farm in the southern Gaza Strip. The farm was completely destroyed a few days ago. Thousands of farmers like Meleh have lost large amounts of land and produce - something it will take a long time to recover from. Oxfam supports farmers in Gaza with agricultural equipment and specialist advice.

SOURCE: Mohammed Al Baba/Oxfam