



DONOR INTERESTS OVER EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION? USAID AND THE “TRIPLE NEXUS” APPROACH IN THE PHILIPPINES

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INTRODUCTION: THE PHILIPPINES AS A “PROMISING NEXUS LABORATORY”?

Conflict and social, environmental, and political fragilities are driving humanitarian crises across the globe. Accelerating climate change as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts have created a drastic social and economic situation in many country countries. In the Philippines, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered capital flight, halted commodity exports and forced business closures, especially of small and medium enterprises from government-imposed lockdowns. There have been huge remittance losses as hundreds of thousands of overseas workers have been repatriated.¹ By August 2020, the Philippine’s economy had contracted by 16.5%.² As well, the enforced lockdowns had pushed around 18.9 million working people into unemployment, thereby worsening their economic situation.³

Even before the pandemic, the Philippines was mired in conflict and fragilities. Land monopoly by the local elite and big businesses and the consequent dispossession and deprivation of

farmers and Indigenous Peoples has caused social unrest and conflict. Gaps in realising the socio-economic rights of working people are common throughout the Philippines, making it among the worst countries for both workers (International Trade Union Confederation, 2020)⁴ and land rights activists in the world.⁵ The country’s vulnerability to climate change impacts and risks threatens the livelihoods of many, particularly those living in rural communities. All these factors are driving demand for humanitarian assistance.

This context and factors affecting the Philippines are not unique to this country. In fact, they are common throughout the Global South and are compelling development actors to scrutinise prevailing systems, including the aid system, to ensure that it truly serves the needs of poor and marginalised communities.

With rising need for humanitarian assistance in long term complex crises, the triple nexus is a reform initiative that aims to improve crisis responses while simultaneously addressing “systemic causes of conflict and vulnerability”.⁶ It hopes to change how humanitarian, development and peace activities are organized so that they more effectively meet human needs, reduce vulnerabilities and promote sustainable peace. An important objective is to decrease the repeated demand for humanitarian assistance by “reducing risks and vulnerability”.⁷

Proponents of the triple nexus argue that crises require comprehensive responses to help resolve the root causes of conflict and fragility by tackling intersecting humanitarian, peace and development issues holistically. It tries to overcome the divide or “silos” among the humanitarian, peace and development actors, through greater coordination and coherence. The “emphasis on the strategic and structural changes from the perspective of donors, governments and organizations delivering services”⁸ is supposedly what “distinguishes the nexus from previous concepts.”⁹

The United Nations (UN) as well as other major financial and development institutions such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) are already implementing or have expressed support for nexus approaches. Some civil society organisations are optimistic about the potential of the triple nexus, as a coherent approach which could “reduc[e] the impact of cyclical or recurrent shocks and stresses,” while providing opportunities to develop “local leadership and the development of national and local systems to accountably provide essential social services” towards “more sustainable, appropriate and transformative responses.”¹⁰

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) has called the Philippines a “promising nexus laboratory” as it faces “natural and man-made disasters” and “setbacks due to the impacts of climate change, natural hazards, violence, conflict, displacement, health emergencies and economic downturns”.¹¹ It cites previous experiences which could inform the current nexus approach, such as CSO work in response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 which “complemented” direct assistance to devastated farming communities with livelihood projects, thus combining humanitarian work with a more sustainable development initiative.¹²

The triple nexus has to overcome several challenges, such as the often-cited “silos” among humanitarian, peace, and development actors, the possibility of prioritising one agenda over others, and a “potentially greater space for donor agendas to politicize humanitarian interventions.”¹³ Contextualising international cooperation in the Philippines exposes the gaps and challenges between theory and practice, between the international policy of the nexus and country-level contexts.

This paper will sketch emerging challenges for the triple nexus through an analysis of the US Agency for International Development’s

(USAID) similar approaches in the Philippines. If the triple nexus intends to reform the aid system to better serve poor and marginalised communities it is important to confront long-standing issues relating to the true effectiveness of aid. This includes the economic and geopolitical interests of donor countries

that drive aid priorities and the resulting impacts on conflict and fragilities. On the peace dimension of the triple nexus, our analysis will show that interlinked security initiatives and humanitarian efforts risks contributing to, instead of reducing, conflict and fragilities.

CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING CONFLICT AND FRAGILITIES

In the Philippine case, relations with major donors such as the United States show that development cooperation and security relations have already been closely linked. This has had implications and an impact for already existing fragilities cooperation priorities and have the potential to create greater risks for communities.

Among the OECD donors, the US has historically been the most prominent in terms of its relations with the Philippines. While other states are also prominent donors to the Philippines, such as Japan with a US\$1 billion in gross ODA in 2019, US-Philippine relations are notable due to a longer colonial history that later drove economic and military agreements. US-Philippine relations have included economic and military aid as part of the “war on terror” context after 9/11. These initiatives continued under the “pivot to Asia” during the Obama administration, and was also a part of the Trump administration’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy amid the prominent US-China rivalry.^{14 15}

Among countries in the East Asia and Oceania region, the Philippines received the largest financial commitment (US\$367million) from the US in 2018. Of this amount, US\$130 million was allocated for military aid. The remaining US\$237 million, which was designated for economic aid, was mostly channelled through the US Department of Defense and the USAID, respectively.¹⁶ The US is also the largest donor to UN OCHA in the Philippines, with commitments of US\$250,000 in 2019.¹⁷

Aside from matters of quantity, the quality of US aid, in relation with donors’ economic and security priorities, and the barriers these could entail for effective development cooperation require a closer examination.

Fragilities from donor-supported incoherence in economic and environmental policy

Development actors and humanitarian actors might agree and collaborate on addressing crises arising from natural disasters, lessening communities’ risks and addressing needs. But at the same time, donors, such as USAID, are failing to reform development cooperation priorities that tend to exacerbate climate-related perils for people and communities. USAID contributes to the exacerbation of climate change impacts and risks of communities through its support of neoliberal policies which means resource grabs from communities. In its 2019-2024 Country Development Cooperation Strategy for the Philippines, USAID gives a significant endorsement to a private sector-led growth model. It lauds the current Philippine state “efforts to de-regulate, privatize,” with *USAID support* for “easing restrictions on foreign equity ownership and the areas in which this is applied [including but not limited to energy].”¹⁸ Its work towards an “inclusive range of investors” includes not only small enterprises but also “global corporations, financial institutions, development banks, regional actors.”

These USAID-lauded policies of further liberalisation of the Philippines’ energy and

related sectors have the potential to exacerbate social and environmental fragilities especially in the context of the climate crisis. The drive to ease foreign ownership restrictions in the Philippines opens up room for economic activities that pose risks for Indigenous Peoples and farmers. Of particular concern are large scale extractive projects or initiatives to support the construction of big, land-use heavy infrastructure. The Mining Act of 1995¹⁹ has liberalised the sector and incentivised corporate mining investments in Indigenous and rural communities.²⁰ This has had significant consequences as these large dam projects threaten displacement and rights violations against Indigenous People and their lands.²¹

In October 2020 the Philippines’ government agreed to allow full foreign ownership in large-scale geothermal energy projects, a move that is aligned with the USAID’s private sector-driven priorities. This was justified as a transition away from coal-powered energy.²² The government has also moved a step further towards giving the go-ahead to the long-opposed Tampakan mining project in Mindanao, southern Philippines. If this project does proceed, it will have a substantial impact on more than 4,000 indigenous Lumad people.²³ These initiatives ignore the experience of Indigenous Peoples in the Cordillera region in northern Philippines with the 2012 Chevron geothermal project. This project saw a “fraudulent” process for free, prior and informed consent, as well as militarisation and the threat of losing ancestral domains, community resources, and livelihoods.²⁴

The Philippines is among the countries experiencing significant climate change impacts. Recently three major typhoons hit the Philippines: Molave (Quinta), Goni (Rolly) - hailed as the strongest typhoon of 2020 - and Vamco (Ulysses). The consequences have been huge - hundreds were killed and hundreds of thousands of families have been forced to evacuate their homes and live in temporary shelters.²⁵ The typhoons have primarily affected

peasant communities in the islands of Luzon and Visayas causing more than US\$255 million (PhP12.3 billion) worth of agricultural damage.²⁶

The devastating effect of these recent typhoons provides an important lesson on the connection between climate related effects and development strategies. To reduce the impacts on communities, the erosion and deforestation of mountain ranges and lands, arising from liberalization priorities, must be urgently reversed, as the country continues to be ravaged by extreme weather events.

Big private sector-driven growth priorities are often at odds with those of land and environmental activists and this can have major human rights consequences for these defenders. At least 10 Indigenous defenders were killed while opposing the Tampakan mining project.²⁷ Beatrice Belen, a woman community leader who led opposition to the above Chevron geothermal project, received state threats²⁸ and was arrested in 2020 on false charges.²⁹ As we will see below, these are also linked with the dominance of security concerns in US-Philippine development cooperation.

USAID in the Philippines: Conflict’s root causes or foreign policy objectives?

An examination of the Philippines’ 21st century experiences with USAID reveals that the agency has linked its development cooperation work to security and humanitarian efforts—with the common thread of security objectives driving into development aid-funded activities. Such experience could offer insights on the importance of drawing a line that separates donor state-driven “security” priorities on the one hand, and “peace-building,” based on addressing roots on the basis of democratic ownership, on the other.

In current USAID thinking, “stabilisation” is a crucial concept in consolidating military gains.³⁰ It comprises “*integrated* civilian-military process[es]” to establish “legitimate authorities”

to “manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence,” and should “incorporate transition plans to economic growth, [and] private sector vibrancy”.³¹ The emergence of this priority may be connected to the recognition that military spending has not translated to an end of conflicts, but rather has often contributed to increasing them. It may also relate to the growing aversion of the international community to large-scale interventions.³²

The stabilisation rhetoric also appears in the 2019-2024 USAID Country Development

Cooperation Strategy with the Philippines, in priorities that encompass “economic growth, improved governance, and resilient development.”³³ Addressing “violent extremism” as a foreign policy goal remains, but now it is to be addressed with “a concentration on social connectedness as a community-level response.”³⁴ In this context, government and community work are a means to shape the situation along US priorities.³⁵

“[G]overnance, humanitarian assistance and development”—from assisting refugees to

USAID and US military aid: Incoherence in conflict and recovery

Long before COVID-19, USAID was involved in the “recovery” of Marawi city, capital of Lanao del Sur province in Mindanao, after its 2017 destruction from combat operations between the US-backed Philippine forces and the Islamist Maute group. USAID has committed at least US\$64 million since 2017, with its Marawi Response Project oriented to “reduce the threat of conflict and violent extremism,” through a largely private sector-led “recovery” model.⁴³

For instance, around 1,000 displaced entrepreneurs received livelihood grants and more than 2,000 received civic engagement trainings by mid-2020.⁴⁴ The general logic was that these activities with internally displaced people would contribute to building both “community resilience”⁴⁵ and good business climates, with the result of better government and community capacity to respond to and recover from “transnational threats,” such as disasters and conflict.⁴⁶ Despite the donor’s claim that it was prioritising the small private sector, fundamental issues of inclusion are still evident.

While the US claims to support Marawi’s recovery through a multibillion dollar USAID project, it also provides significant military aid

to the Philippines, totaling **US\$554 million** between 2016 and 2019.⁴⁷ US military aid to the Philippines has been criticized by various groups in both countries for contributing to exacerbating conflict and fragilities in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao.⁴⁸ According to the latest report of Philippine-based rights group KARAPATAN, bombing under the Duterte government has affected 372,611 civilians⁴⁹ including environment and Indigenous Peoples rights defenders in Mindanao.⁵⁰ Moreover, the US has expressed interest in “expanding aerial “intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” over Mindanao which would possibly “escalate an air war that has a brutal and indiscriminate effect on people as well as the environment.”⁵¹ Former US President Donald Trump himself described Mindanao as “a prime piece of real estate from a military standpoint.”⁵²

Parliamentarians also recognize the role of US military aid in the widespread and escalating rights abuses in the Philippines, as shown in the passage of the Philippine Human Rights Act in the U.S. House of Representatives, which could block US aid to the Philippine police and military if passed by the Senate.⁵³

reconstruction activities are among the areas that complement security operations.”³⁶ While the United States has provided US\$22.6 million of COVID-related resources to the Philippines as of October 2020,³⁷ these resources came alongside “civilian activities” where US troops delivered medical supplies and equipment to Mindanao and Luzon, according to official counter-terrorism reports.³⁸ An important precedent was the US security forces’ “humanitarian” involvement during typhoon Haiyan in late 2013 as well as military roles in disaster risk reduction and response. This experience became the pretext for a 2015 US-Philippine military agreement.

USAID has had prior extensive experience with US and Philippine security actors relating to counterinsurgency in Mindanao. Concerns have been raised regarding donor-driven security priorities including: 1) how economic projects became means to states’ security goals (e.g., prioritising infrastructure that have “strategic importance” to the military), and 2) the promotion of private sector-led growth.³⁹ For instance, this was the case with the USAID project Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) which ran from 1996 to 2012, where USAID collaborated with the Philippine military and the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines.⁴⁰ For communities on the ground, these are intertwined with US economic interests in the island⁴¹ such as in the oil and gas-rich Liguasan Marsh.⁴²

There continue to be conflicts in Mindanao despite the peace accord and new government structures, which were created following negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, indicating the depth and complexity of the roots causes of conflict. Persisting land issues and socio-economic grievances remain as drivers for the poor to take up arms with the rural-based New People’s Army. In addition to the military, state-backed paramilitary units have been criticised by Indigenous groups for facilitating rights violations and the entry of mining corporations.⁵⁴ Islamist groups, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

(BIFF), the Abu Sayyaf Group, and the Maute group who besieged Marawi City in 2017, and private armies of local elites remain. US defence forces have also continued to be active in the area through the Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, though on a smaller footprint.⁵⁵

Repressed participation deepens the roots of conflict

The security priorities of key donors, including the US, in the Philippines have had significant impact as well as repercussions for the role of civil society as development and humanitarian actors. The USAID-Philippines development cooperation strategy stresses the importance of a vibrant civil society. But major trends in Philippines policy and practice show a trajectory towards exclusion, instead of preventing conflict via “put[ting] people at the centre,” with accountability and “opportunities... to identify their [people’s] needs.”⁵⁶

When Philippine state policy aligned with US security priorities after the 9/11 attacks, it set the stage for long-running counter-insurgency measures to be framed as “counter-terror” efforts. A succession of 21st century state plans, the most recent being the Operation Plan Kapanatagan, has instituted a “whole-of-nation” approach, wherein the roles of supposedly civilian agencies have expanded to include military objectives. The impacts have been far-reaching in an increasing militarization of the government’s approach to civil society especially during the pandemic and its lockdowns and with the passing of a 2020 “Anti-Terror” law. The law further reinforces the long-running counterinsurgency practice of targeting activists and civil society by equating them with the communist armed movement, who are military targets.⁵⁷

Despite the work of the UN Humanitarian Country Team where development, peace and humanitarian strategies are linked in responding to the pandemic, the primary state response has been largely militarised.⁵⁸ For a significant period, this has meant top-down,

strict movement restrictions and lockdowns enforced by a national task force led by former military officials, with the imperative testing activities left on the shoulders of local governments. While restrictive measures may be necessary in a pandemic, a coalition of Philippine development organisations has stated that “the Philippines [was] ranked as having among the most militarist and authoritarian responses to the COVID-19 crisis with 152,000 accosted for “quarantine violations” including 38,000 reportedly arrested.”⁵⁹ Despite the fact that new loans and international emergency assistance have supposedly flowed into national state coffers for the pandemic, there have been substantial criticisms in terms of the quantity and quality of the humanitarian response.⁶⁰

The controversial “Anti-Terrorism Act” is a related and key issue. This law, which was marked “urgent” by the Philippines President on the first day that strict lockdowns were partially lifted,⁶¹ has continued long-running security cooperation priorities. Critics of the law assert that it “closes civic space by giving state security forces extraordinary powers to surveil, arrest, detain and even convict anyone it finds disagreeable...by unilaterally and even baselessly declaring anyone in civil society or the general public as a ‘terrorist.’”⁶²

In November 2020, two Indigenous Aetas, who were fleeing from military operations, were the first to be charged under this “Anti-Terrorism Act”. Lawyers’ groups have issued complaints, stating that the circumstances related to the arrest include planting of false evidence and torture. During the recent pandemic there have been crackdowns on civilian activists, actions that contradict basic humanitarian principles. This has reached the point where groups conducting relief initiatives are being targeted and arrested.⁶³

Documented communications from the United States Embassy in the Philippines indicate that the US is supporting these actions. The stated justification is that the new law “will

bring the Philippines into closer alignment with international norms,” enabling “more effective terrorism prosecutions.”⁶⁴ This is not surprising since the law is part of the US-Philippine security cooperation and is a function of “the embassy’s growing portfolio of counterterrorism, law enforcement, and judicial sector programs to assist the Philippine government”⁶⁵ via the US Justice Department’s “multi-year effort to advise the Philippine government on amending its counterterrorism law.”⁶⁶

The same set of communications show that the US maintains that “much of this criticism [against the law] as ‘misplaced’”—insisting “the legislation itself was sound, and that concerns from human rights groups should prompt scrutiny of how the law is implemented.”⁶⁷

The militarised response of the Philippine government has excluded people, especially women, from participating in health and humanitarian responses to the impact of the pandemic. There are no mechanisms for public influence in analysing risks and conceiving collective outcomes. The current militarized situation, which is a logical outcome of the long history of US-Philippine cooperation, is supposedly created to address “violence”. But instead, it acts as barriers to democratic ownership in planning responses and collective outcomes, from pandemic responses to financing decisions and development cooperation.

This is a long way from the vision of the triple nexus and its aim to improve crisis responses while simultaneously addressing systemic causes of conflict and vulnerability in which civil society can play a critical role. Instead of creating cooperative engagement, the Philippines has deliberately created a situation where basic civil-political rights, and the acknowledged roles of civil society as development actors and rights defenders are threatened. This context poses major challenges to the needed ownership of processes for development and peacebuilding,

creating an environment where political and economic grievances are left unaddressed. Important issues, such as the concerns on extractivist economic policies or the Philippine state’s unequal relations with donors will not,

in this atmosphere, receive the attention they need. CSOs describe a “culture of impunity,” one which will only deepen the possibility of conflict within which the vision of a triple nexus can never be achieved.

CONTRIBUTING TO A JUST AND LASTING PEACE

It has been long recognized that humanitarian, peace and development agendas have to be interrelated. They must be tackled coherently and holistically to respond to the needs of communities in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. This is the only useful way to address the roots of conflict and fragilities as a step towards building sustainable communities. The triple nexus argues that aid should be aligned towards these objectives. However, our analysis shows that donors and communities, can understand the meaning of peace and development differently. How donors pursue the humanitarian-peace-development agenda, as they see it, can undermine the needs, welfare and positive development of communities.

In the Philippines, the USAID’s approach to the interlinking of humanitarian, peace and development efforts, with its emphasis its security policies, runs a strong risk of worsening the situation of conflict-affected and fragile communities. USAID also promotes neoliberal policies that push for private sector led economic growth and the corporate capture of development, which have provoked resource grabs and displacement of indigenous and peasant communities. USAID’s humanitarian efforts are also strongly connected to the US security agenda. These links were evident in their approach and operations in Typhoon Haiyan, the Marawi Siege, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and in its their vocal support to the 2020 Anti-Terror Act. USAID’s framing of the peace agenda as primarily a security agenda justifies and intensifies the militarisation of communities. It contributes to perpetuating impunity and deepens the roots of conflict.

Moreover, private sector dominance and political repression protecting its interests can hinder the meaningful participation of people’s organisations and civil society in development processes and governance.

If it is to truly act as a framework for reform of the aid system, the triple nexus must recognise that aid can reinforce unequal relations between donor and recipient countries when it prioritises the economic and geopolitical interests of donors. Inside of aid’s stated objective of addressing the conditions of poor and marginalised communities, it may have the opposite effects. Aid measures to implement the triple nexus must be carefully implemented not to exacerbate conflict and fragilities, particularly when aid is combined with wider donor economic, security and foreign policy interests. Without recognising these underlying factors in the aid system, the triple nexus will end up like past unrealised reforms.

Donors must uphold their commitments and comply with effective development principles in the various measures that bridge the humanitarian and development divide. These include respect for democratic ownership, inclusive partnerships, and the transparency and accountability of duty-bearers. These principles are essential, as the OECD considers “accountability to the people...transparency, voice and participation” to be critical in “improving collective outcomes.”⁶⁸ Alongside a focus on results, of addressing economic, political, gendered inequalities, and upholding people’s rights, the effectiveness principles point to the need to “leave no one behind” to achieve a just and lasting peace.

Reforms towards an effective and efficient aid system should break away from the legacies of colonial relations and pave the way for more democratised processes and greater collaboration with communities, people's organisations (POs) and civil society that

work on the ground. Closing civic space must be reversed; and POs and CSOs should be supported and enabled to fulfil their roles in national development processes and governance toward rights-based and people-centred development.

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