

# IASC Discussion Paper: Exploring the linkages between AAP, Localisation and the HDP Nexus



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Against the backdrop of growth in the frequency, complexity and scale of humanitarian crises<sup>1</sup>, declining funding,<sup>2</sup> and questions of efficiency and effectiveness,<sup>3</sup> it is becoming increasingly clear that fundamental change is required to reform the humanitarian system<sup>4</sup>. Within this, the approaches of accountability to affected populations (AAP),<sup>5</sup> localisation<sup>i</sup> and the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus<sup>ii</sup> are all drivers towards a humanitarian system which can be held to account by the people it serves, where key decisions can be made at the grassroots level enabling local actors to work to develop their own programmes in feasible, collaborative, complementary and holistic ways to tackle key risks and root causes of crises.

As the sector prepares for the transition to a new Emergency Relief Coordinator later in 2024, this discussion paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates on humanitarian reform and outline how the linkages between these three workstreams could be better leveraged to deliver meaningful, sustainable changes to the humanitarian architecture. The paper is based on reflections on lessons learned and future priorities from the Co-Chairs of the IASC Taskforces on [AAP \(TF2\)](#), on [Localisation \(TF5\)](#) and the [HDP nexus \(TF4\)](#) and has been peer reviewed by a number of key stakeholders in the sector.<sup>iii</sup>

## Common barriers to systemic change

Whilst significant efforts have been made to advance progress across all three workstreams, particularly in the policy and operational spheres,<sup>6</sup> several core structural barriers at the heart of the aid system continue to hinder the opportunity for the more significant systemic change that AAP, localisation, and the nexus have the potential to create. In particular:

1. Unequal power imbalances underpin the aid architecture, in which the majority of resources and decision-making remain tilted towards donors and some aid providers (mainly UN and INGOs), rather than affected populations themselves. Whilst these power dynamics are evidenced throughout the structures of aid

<sup>i</sup> Whilst there is no universal definition of localisation, this paper uses the [Grand Bargain description](#) of “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary”.

<sup>ii</sup> The definition adopted in the [2020 IASC Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes](#) describes the HDP Nexus as “a collective effort by humanitarian, development and, where relevant and appropriate, peace actors to reduce people’s needs, risks and vulnerabilities by working towards ‘collective outcomes’ and addressing the root causes of conflict and chronic instability.”

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delivery, it is the deeply held, and often subconscious, beliefs around who should give and receive aid which ultimately prevent any significant transfer of power to communities and local actors from taking place.<sup>7</sup>

2. The humanitarian business model perpetuates a system in which (a) primacy is placed on individual organisational mandates over the pursuit of collective impact (b) competition between organisations is incentivised over collaboration (c) self-sustainment of international actors is prioritised over sustainable exit plans. Combined, this model is often fundamentally at odds with the approach of collective working and complementarity that a people-centred approach requires.<sup>8</sup>

3. The importance of ensuring the sustainability of the work of humanitarians by institutionalising complementarity,

collaboration, and coordination with development and, where appropriate, peace actors as early as possible in the response.

4. Humanitarian, development and peace funding lacks flexibility and risk appetite, reinforcing siloes, undermining efforts to work in collaboration, and preventing rapid response to changing needs and priorities of affected populations themselves.

Ultimately the opportunities for reform that AAP, localisation and the HDP nexus offer require not just normative or technical solutions, but also a political commitment to cede power and control at all levels of the system. Whilst the interrelationships between each workstream outlined in the next section offer several opportunities for system reform, without a fundamental shift in the political and funding vehicles to address the above three issues, progress will continue to be limited.

## Overview of links between AAP-localisation-nexus

At their root, AAP and localisation both focus on addressing systemic power imbalances within the humanitarian system<sup>9</sup> by devolving decision-making power and resources to affected populations and local and national actors (LNAs).<sup>10</sup> Whilst less explicitly addressing power dynamics, the nexus offers the opportunity to ‘do aid differently’ by reframing aid delivery around tackling the root causes of crises<sup>11</sup> and fragility and ensuring scaled up development investments to address those. Although each approach has a distinct set of outcomes, there are clear, mutually reinforcing, linkages between them, not least because they all promote a more *people-centred approach* to delivering aid. In essence, taking a people-centred approach means designing aid that is tailored to the self-reported needs of affected populations, who are able to then directly gain access to those goods and services in an inclusive and respectful way.<sup>12</sup> The core aim of AAP is to create a more people-centred humanitarian system by facilitating the

right of affected populations to hold aid actors to account and meaningfully participate in programming decisions. Localisation recognises the central role that LNAs can and should play in designing and delivering programming which is responsive to community needs. The HDP nexus is underpinned by the overall objective of ending needs by addressing the root causes of crises, fragility, and their consequences in a strategic and collaborative manner. Taking a people centred approach is crucial to this in which programming is designed to meet the needs of communities across the HDP spectrum.

The table on the following page outlines the key linkages between the three approaches and the infographic provides a visual summary of those. This is an idealised model premised on each workstream successfully delivering against its intended outcomes – limited achievement within each workstream will likely also limit opportunities to leverage the linkages outlined

here.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, whilst there are clear opportunities for strengthened joint working, it is important not to oversimplify the links between each workstream. For example, it's vital to recognise the heterogeneity of both LNAs and communities themselves and as such, LNAs should not become a proxy for direct engagement with affected populations

and vice versa particularly given that relying on existing local power structures may perpetuate marginalisation of vulnerable groups. Similarly, working across the nexus should aim to recognise and build on local diversity, rather than viewing LNAs as 'implementing partners' and creating top-down systems that force LNAs to fit into formalised processes.<sup>13</sup>

### Specific links and complementarities.

#### AAP ↔ Localisation

- Localisation “helps ensure decisions by humanitarian actors are made closer to the communities they serve. This, in turn may help humanitarian actors better reflect the needs and goals of these communities” (ICVA 2021).
- Feedback and insights provided by affected communities can inform locally led action, in line with the principle of subsidiarity in which decisions are taken at the closest possible level to communities.
- Additionally, LNAs can improve accountability mechanisms by ensuring that they are contextually relevant and inclusive and can help to strengthen trust between communities and aid providers as they are often (although not always) more embedded within community structures.

#### Localisation ↔ HDP Nexus

- LNAs tend not to operate with the same distinction between sectors that structure the international system, with activities that typically straddle humanitarian/development siloes. Localised nexus approaches can also provide a more relevant framing than top-down conceptions.
- Additionally, LNAs are often best placed to provide sustained services throughout the lifecycle of a crisis due to their proximity to affected populations, their position as first responders, and their agility to rapidly respond to changing needs in a locally relevant way.

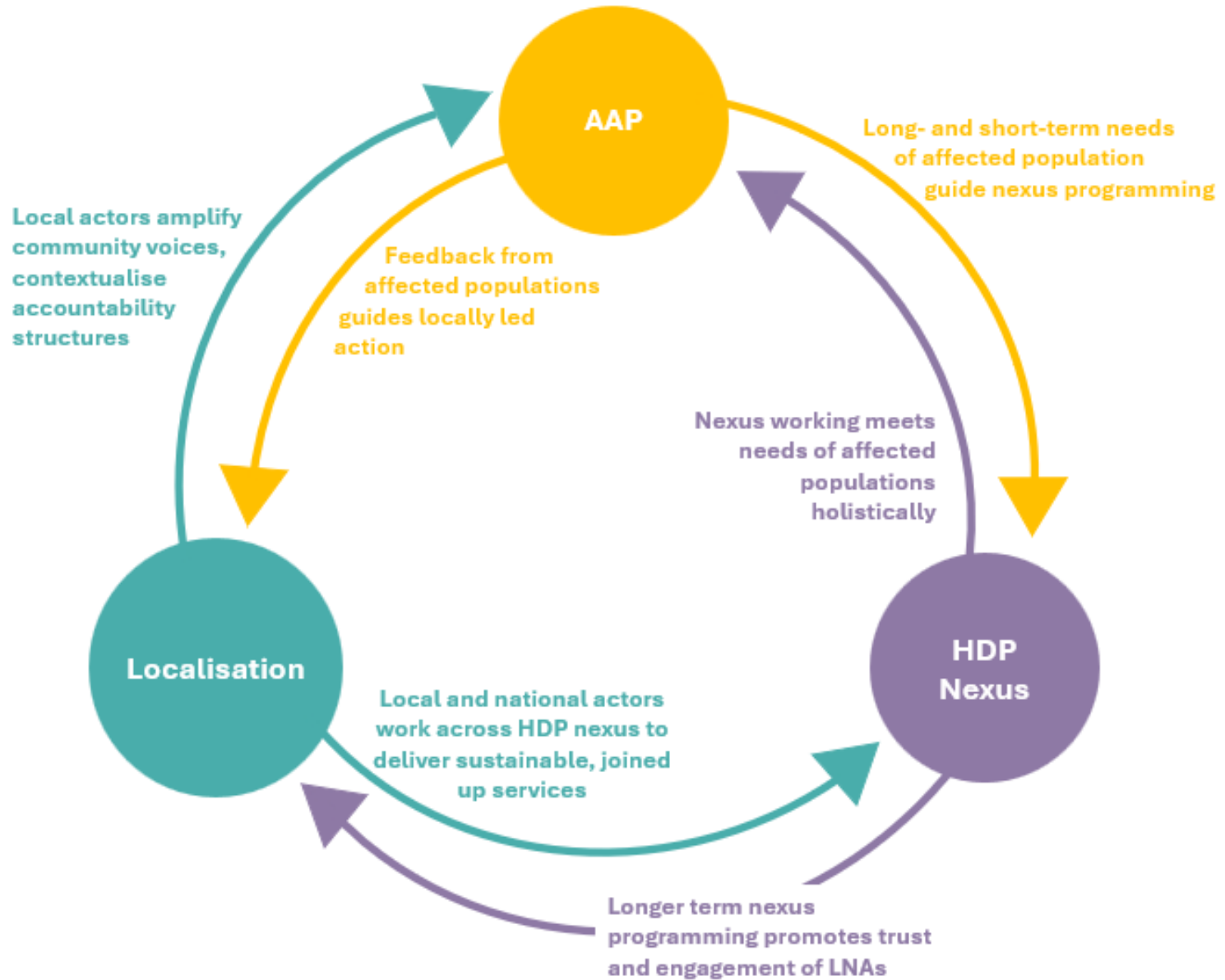
#### HDP Nexus ↔ AAP

- Bridging the divide between 'humanitarian', 'development' and 'peace' needs can better reflect the priorities of affected populations in crises, which generally includes long term stability, self-reliance and resilience alongside basic 'lifesaving' needs.
- Similarly, placing affected populations at the centre of nexus programming can help ensure that joint services, collective outcomes, and programming are guided by a holistic picture of what communities need.

<sup>iv</sup> Recognising that all three workstreams have experienced both conceptual and operational challenges relating to a lack of shared definitions or agreed outcomes, limited buy-in from key

stakeholders, inefficient or ineffective funding allocations, complexity around who constitutes 'local' or 'the community' and who they legitimately represent, amongst other issues.

**Visual summary: Specific links and complementarities**



## Learning from practice

- 1. Area-based approaches have had success in designing programming that is led by the needs of communities, and delivered by local actors:** Area based approaches provide a positive example of how decentralised aid delivery can be led by the priorities and preferences of affected populations, led primarily by local actors, including local government, who are often already operating in an 'area based' manner,<sup>14</sup> and traverse the HDP spectrum.<sup>15</sup> This can ensure a sustainable way for locally driven recovery and an exit strategy for humanitarians.
- 2. Similarly, decentralised coordination models, such as sub-national AAP groups, can enable a more locally led response:** Learning from Myanmar suggests decentralised coordination bodies have greater success in promoting local leadership, creating common services, and enabling flexible programming that is responsive to changing local needs.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that area-specific objectives for collective AAP, localisation and nexus working may be more effective than setting a national agenda – something echoed by learning on HDP collective outcomes, which have seen greater success at a regional, rather than national level.
- 3. There has been an increasing tendency amongst international actors to focus on AAP, localisation and the nexus, as technical processes rather than pathways to structural change:** The three workstreams are often framed as 'technical fixes' to improve existing working, for example by making programming more cost effective or improving efficiencies, at the expense of making more significant structural changes to programming, coordination and decision-making.<sup>17</sup> Relatedly, the metrics of success for across each approach tend to be based on process indicators (e.g. number of local organisations participating in coordination structures, number of individual feedback messages received) rather than outcomes.
- 4. Partnerships with “non-traditional” local actors can be effective for ending needs as an outcome of working across the nexus:** Creating coalitions with non-traditional actors beyond NGOs, such as diaspora groups and local universities,<sup>y</sup> can enable a more holistic approach to understanding and meeting the needs of affected populations across the HDP nexus and can better leverage local voices in this process.
- 5. The development of Collective outcomes across the HDP nexus can encourage more equitable partnerships between local and international actors when delivered sub-nationally:** *“Collective outcomes are context-specific, engage the comparative advantage of all actors, draw on multi-year timeframes and rely on effective leadership and coordination”*.<sup>18</sup> This HDP nexus approach helps break down siloes by developing a shared understanding of need, risk and vulnerability, and creating opportunities for collaboration between local and national actors. Further learning can be drawn from existing activities of LNAs and governments, which often already span the HDP nexus, and offer clear entry points to embed aid funding.
- 6. Long term local actor engagement can lead to better programming and improved trust:** The proximity and continuous engagement of LNAs with communities can result in improved trust and programming that more meaningfully meets needs of affected populations: *“When it comes to sustainability and ownership of humanitarian projects, local NGOs have a fundamentally different relationship [to affected populations]”*.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the positive community outcomes that are driven by refugee-led organisations<sup>20</sup> and women-led organisations point to the integral role that such groups play in providing inclusive, locally-contextualised programming.

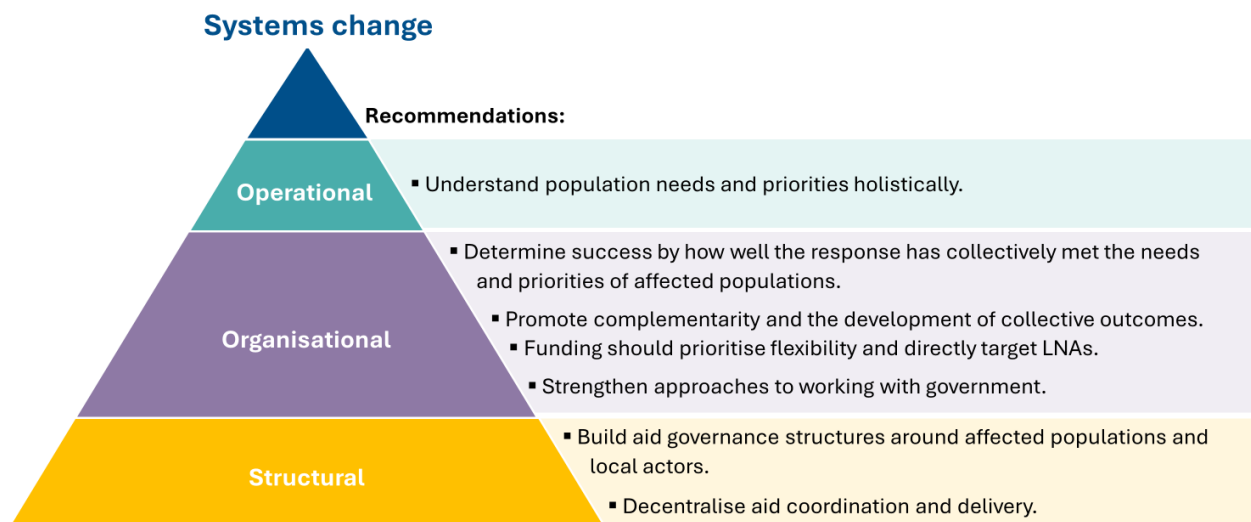
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<sup>y</sup> Non-traditional actors include but are not limited to diaspora groups, *ad hoc* volunteer groups, local researchers and universities, professional associations and students' groups, the private sector, the

media, livelihoods associations and self-help groups. For more information see: Wall and Hedlund 2016 and Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015.

## Recommendations for leveraging AAP, localisation and the HDP nexus for systemic change

As highlighted earlier in this paper, systemic change requires action at both the operational, organisational/programmatic and the structural levels – as illustrated in the below diagram. The recommendations presented here reflect these different entry points and highlight that concentrating efforts at only one level is unlikely to result in meaningful system reform.



**1 Build aid governance structures around affected populations and local actors:** The international IASC coordination structures underpinning the humanitarian architecture need to enable local actors to be full partners in setting the agenda with international actors, rather than having a top-down approach. Within this, decision-making power over what aid is delivered, in what format and to whom, must be devolved as far as possible to the local level, with meaningful opportunities for affected populations and LNAs to lead the process. This also requires aid governance to meaningfully recognise downwards accountability channels to affected populations as well as necessary accountability to donors. The Flagship Initiative provides an interesting example of an attempt to restructure the existing humanitarian system in this way, and represents an opportunity for many of the recommendations included in this paper to be put into practice. However, to meet the goal of systemic change, the Flagship Initiative will require far greater interagency and donor ownership, inclusion of a much broader range of actors<sup>21</sup> across the HDP spectrum and more appetite to take risks on different ways of working.

**2 Decentralise international aid coordination and delivery:** To the greatest extent possible, international coordination and programming should be decentralised to the regional and sub-regional levels to promote aid delivery that is multisectoral, and encompasses humanitarian, development and, where relevant, peacebuilding activities that are contextualised to locally defined needs and priorities. However, it's important to note that decentralisation on its own does not necessarily equate to localisation and that both LNAs and affected populations must play a central role in leading such efforts to avoid simply replicating power imbalances at a regional level. Within this there are clear complexities relating to the heterogenous nature of local actors and communities themselves, meaning that inclusion must be a central pillar of any area-based<sup>22</sup> or other decentralised way of working.

**3 Determine success by how well the response has collectively met the needs and priorities of affected populations:** Similarly, to improving how we measure needs (see below recommendation), measurements of progress and success should be based on the extent to which aid delivery has led to better outcomes for communities, rather than on whether aid agencies have delivered their programming. This not only requires placing significantly more emphasis on measuring impact, including building a greater understanding of success from the perspective of communities themselves, but also frames success as something that can only be achieved collectively, recognising that no one organisation will be able to adequately meet all the needs of affected populations. The recently updated Core Humanitarian Standard<sup>23</sup> is particularly useful as it provides a set of measurements of success based on how well the system is meeting the collective commitments made to affected communities. Additionally, the voices of communities themselves should remain at the centre of measurements of progress, both through the use of independent feedback mechanisms, the development of community-led definitions of success, and the integration of community voices into aid government structures, such as through community committees or advisory groups.

**4 Promote the principle of complementarity in programming across the nexus:** Complementarity recognises “*the combination of strengths that each organisation can bring in a complementary way that ensures the ability of [the response] as a whole, to respond to the humanitarian needs of those affected by crises*”.<sup>24</sup> As highlighted earlier, placing the needs and priorities of affected populations at the centre can reframe how the aid system is structured and the role that each organisation or entity can take to deliver collective outcomes. This is particularly useful for helping to align actors across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding spectrum as it encourages programming to be framed around community needs, recognising that these are often not as linear as aid actors assume them to be e.g. livelihood support is often a demand immediately following a shock, and not three months later once the delivery of ‘life saving assistance’ has been completed. Complementarity also encourages more equitable partnership with local actors by recognising their unique role and skills in responding to community needs. Within this, there is an opportunity to interrogate the role of international actors as intermediaries, exploring the possibility for a transition to convenor and facilitation roles, rather than direct implementers.<sup>25</sup>

**5 Funding should be longer term, have greater flexibility and prioritise local actors to deliver their own programming:** As highlighted by the recent Independent IDP Review,<sup>26</sup> greater coordination between humanitarian and development donors is required to deliver sustained funding in protracted crises. Additionally, the lack of flexible funding and risk appetite remains a key barrier to delivery across all three workstreams, preventing programmatic responsiveness in AAP, limiting quality funding to local actors, and hindering the ability to work in non-siloed ways across the HDP nexus. Significant shifts need to be made to the current funding delivery model to allow for greater agility in service delivery and programme management. This recommendation builds on the existing work prioritising quality funding under the Grand Bargain.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, given that “*many local aid organisations already combine the three pillars of the HDP within their organisations*”,<sup>28</sup> LNAs are often extremely well placed to deliver programming across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding spectrum. Their proximity and long-term relationship with the communities they are embedded into also mean that they are often more trusted than international counterparts, and better understand the priorities and preferences of the population. As such, LNAs – particularly refugee-led and women-led organisations – should receive a significant proportion of direct funding to design and lead programming across the HDP nexus, rather than being sub-contracted as ‘implementing partners’.

**6 Strengthen the humanitarian approach to working with government:** While humanitarian interventions are normally conducted at the request of, and in agreement with, governments, humanitarian actors have historically been hesitant to engage significantly with governments in crisis affected countries for fear of compromising the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanity which are critical to safeguarding humanitarian space. Similarly, accountability structures between humanitarian actors and government remain limited, and aid accountability mechanisms tend to operate in isolation from any government equivalents.

Whilst there are certainly complexities to engaging with governments, particularly in contexts where the government is a central driver of the crisis, there are opportunities to enhance principled engagement to support longer-term outcomes. Governments are a key stakeholder for the HDP nexus, given the central role they play in the delivery of sustainable basic services with a responsibility to be accountable to their citizens. Excluding government actors from humanitarian coordination and programming can in some contexts, entrench the siloes between humanitarian and development aid, create significant gaps in situations where humanitarian aid is being phased out, and negatively impact the sustainability of aid delivery. Additionally, limited engagement with government, in some contexts, can place local organisations in a difficult position as they are often unable to avoid building a relationship with government institutions given their position and proximity in country. Although there are increasing examples of good practice and global guidance,<sup>29</sup> advancing progress on people-centred assistance requires further cohesive efforts to engage with government humanitarian action, guided by the principle of shared responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

**7 Assess population needs holistically:** Limiting definitions of need to purely ‘life saving’ “overlooks people’s dignity, agency and ongoing realities”<sup>31</sup> and perpetuates the highly siloed model of aid delivery that characterises the humanitarian sector. Instead, community need should be understood holistically, taking into account both immediate lifesaving priorities, alongside longer-term needs for stability, resilience and wellbeing.<sup>32</sup> Again, this helps to reframe aid delivery as people-centred, rather than centring the ability of aid actors to respond,<sup>33</sup> which in turn encourages the design of aid that is explicitly multisector and multidisciplinary. This sort of analysis is vital for enabling aid programming that straddles the nexus and should be a key consideration in ongoing ‘boundary setting’<sup>34</sup> exercises. The approach should go hand in hand with greater commitments from humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors to develop data sharing protocols, common indicators and, most crucially, clear shared responsibilities to respond. Specifically, this could include:

- Designing needs assessments to reflect the needs and priorities of affected populations to understand their existing capacities and *demand* for assistance, rather than structuring assessments based on what the aid sector is able to *supply*.
- Better analysis of existing data which moves away from ‘indicator by indicator’ findings, towards a more comprehensive narrative of what communities want and need.<sup>35</sup>
- Increased use of creative, non-traditional methods for understanding community priorities and needs, including co-production and participatory programme design.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See for example Development Initiatives. 2023. [Global Humanitarian Assistance Report: Key trends in humanitarian need and funding](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Oxfam. 2023. [Still too important to fail: Addressing the humanitarian financing gap in an era of escalating climate impacts](#). | European Humanitarian Forum. 2024. [Addressing the global humanitarian funding gap](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Lilly, D. 2023. [Humanitarian action is the answer to fewer and fewer of today's humanitarian crises](#). ODI. London.
- <sup>4</sup> Soudi, L. 2022. [It's Time to Fix a Failing Humanitarian Aid System](#). John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.
- <sup>5</sup> The [Interagency Standing Committee \(IASC\) defines AAP](#) as the process of humanitarian actors giving account, taking account and being held to account by affected populations.
- <sup>6</sup> For example commitments to earmark funding for local organisations, incorporation of AAP as a standard component of programming, and the [development of shared principles for collaborative working across the nexus](#).
- <sup>7</sup> See for example ODI. 2016. [Time to let go: remaking humanitarian action for the modern era](#). | Konyndyk, J., P. Saez & R. Worden. 2020. [Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area-Based Humanitarian Coordination Model](#). CGD Policy Paper 184.
- <sup>8</sup> Doherty, J. 2023. [From tick-box to turning point: getting accountability right for improved humanitarian action](#). ALNAP. London.
- <sup>9</sup> Lough, O., V. Barbelet & S. Njeri. 2022. [Inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action: findings from a three-year study](#). ODI.
- <sup>10</sup> ICVA. 2018. [Localisation examined: an ICVA briefing paper](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Morinière, L. & Morrison-Métois, S. 2023. [Working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus: What can we learn from evaluations?](#) London: ODI/ALNAP.
- <sup>12</sup> Red Cross EU Office. 2023. [People-centRED approach: Strengthening local-to-global capacities](#).
- <sup>13</sup> De Geoffroy, V., F. Grunewald & R. Ní Chéilleachair. 2017. [More than the money: localisation in practice](#). Trócaire and Groupe URD.
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- <sup>15</sup> Schell, J., M. Hilmi & S. Hirano. 2020. Area-based approaches: an alternative in contexts of urban displacement. [Forced Migration Review](#). Issue 63.
- <sup>16</sup> Arevalo, G. 2023. [Achieving impactful, localised AAP in Myanmar: recalibrating the existing approach](#). ODI.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>18</sup> IASC. 2023. [Guidance Note: Advancing the HDP nexus approach through IASC global clusters](#). IASC Task Force 4 on Humanitarian Development Collaboration and its Linkages to Peace.
- <sup>19</sup> Somali Nexus Platform. 2023. [Enough Theory! A Somali consortium putting nexus programming into action](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Alrustum, H. & G. Kallas. 2023. [The transformative impact of refugee-led organisations on communities](#). Humanitarian Practice Network. Issue 83, article 7.
- <sup>21</sup> Sida, L. et al. 2024. [Flagship Initiative: first year learning report](#). Institute of Development Studies. Brighton.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid*  
[umanitarian Practice Network Magazine](#). Issue 71, no 6.
- <sup>23</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability](#). 2024.
- <sup>24</sup> Austin, L. & S. Chessex. 2018. [The case for complementarity](#). British Red Cross.
- <sup>25</sup> See for example: The Grand Bargain Intermediary Caucus (N.d.) [Towards Co-Ownership: The Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally-Led Humanitarian Action](#). | Peace Direct (2023) [The nine roles that intermediaries can play in international cooperation](#).
- <sup>26</sup> Sida, L. et al. 2024. [Independent review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement](#). ODI. London.
- <sup>27</sup> Grand Bargain. 2023. [Quality Funding One Pager](#).
- <sup>28</sup> Meininghaus, E. et al. 2024. [How to decolonise the HDP Nexus: Policy recommendations for donors, the UN and other international agencies and INGOs](#). Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Policy Brief.
- <sup>29</sup> For example IASC. 2015. [Guideline on cluster coordination at country level](#). IASC Sub-Working Group on the Cluster Approach and the Global Cluster Coordinators' Group.
- <sup>30</sup> Slim, H. 2024. [Painful choices: How humanitarians can prioritise in a world of rising need](#). Global Public Policy Institute.
- <sup>31</sup> Sattler, M. & T. Buder. 2024. [Rethinking humanitarian principles? Consider community, context and common sense](#). Ground Truth Solutions.
- <sup>32</sup> Spencer, A. & D. Barter. 2024. [Beyond survival in displacement: rights essential for wellbeing](#). ODI Briefing Paper. London.
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- <sup>34</sup> OCHA. 2015. Prioritisation within the Humanitarian Programme Cycle.
- <sup>35</sup> Kielwein, C. 2023. [Can we make better use of humanitarian data for an impartial and humane response to crisis?](#) ODI HPG.