

Nexus²⁵ Memo

Nexus²⁵ Conference: Rethinking Multilateralism in the face of Complex Crises

Rome Event – Tuesday, May 24th; Wednesday, May 25th

Against a backdrop of heightened concerns over the wider fallout of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, [Nexus²⁵ - Shaping Multilateralism](#), an international project led by IAI (Istituto Affari Internazionali) in collaboration with the United Nations Foundation, held a two-day conference on 24-25 May 2022 in Rome. This is the third policy conversation Nexus²⁵ has organized, following the Munich Security Conference side event in February and the roundtable discussion on the sidelines of World Bank-International Monetary Fund Spring Meetings in Washington DC in April.



The conference kicked off on May 24 with a high-level panel discussion: [“Tackling the Global Shockwaves of the Ukraine Crisis”](#) between **Aranca González Laya**, Dean of Paris School of International Affairs at Sciences Po, **Arif Husain**, Chief Economist at the World Food Programme, and **Cindy McCain**, United States Permanent Representative to the UN Agencies in Rome, moderated by Center for American Progress Senior fellow **Michael Werz**. IAI Director

Nathalie Tocci set the scene by presenting the key takeaways of Nexus²⁵ research on the Sahel and South Asia before the discussion. While the Ukraine crisis and its repercussions on the global food supply chain and markets were at the center of this evening event, the insights of the panelists and the interaction with the public made clear the need for a more comprehensive approach to deal with complex, interconnected crises around the world.

The discussions continued on May 25 with a day-long workshop: “Strengthening Multilateral Responses to Complex Crises”. The gathering served as a platform for lively and frank exchanges, knowledge-sharing and debate among international experts, civil society, and representatives from international organizations on the interplay between climate, conflict, migration, and multiple facets of security, and the multilateral approaches adopted to tackle these issues. Over three sessions, kicked-off by brief interviews, the workshop brought diverse perspectives and expertise to the table. The participants discussed the evolution of multilateralism in the face of nexus issues, reflected on the progress made, acknowledged the limitations of current interventions, and deliberated on the obstacles to both preventive and responsive multi-stakeholder actions, and the elements essential for operationalizing nexus thinking.

Here are some of the key takeaways from our deliberations:

On the increasing complexity of nexus challenges

- Climate change is a threat multiplier particularly in contexts experiencing political instability and poverty (Myanmar), while external shocks that are no longer localized in their effects (the Ukraine crisis) risk bringing livelihoods and food insecurity, as well as social cohesion and trust in the governments to a tipping point.
- The emergence and spread of armed conflict in the Sahel is essentially linked to the scarcity, management and distribution of natural resources. Combined with governance deficits underpinning political, social and economic marginalization and exacerbated by the climate crisis, the impacts can be explosive. Therefore, approaches primarily oriented to military solutions cannot fully address the underlying drivers of conflict.
- Disconnect between local, national and international actors is a major issue underpinning the ineffectiveness of interventions. As long as national elites remain the only interlocutors for international actors, their engagement is likely to fall short of effectively responding to local populations' needs and grievances.
- Localized understanding of crises is essential for moving from abstract thinking into concrete action.



On the evolution and increasing complexity of the multilateral system

- Multilateralism no longer means a UN-focused and state-centered system. There has been significant proliferation and diversification of actors, fora and initiatives, with increasing role and relevance for regional organizations, non-state actors and IFI's, among others.
- There is great value in such proliferation, but it also means greater complexity and new challenges, particularly for coordination and leadership – where gaps continue to exist. Do today's problems lie in too much multilateralism and too little leadership?
- The scope and limits of what the UN General Assembly and the Security Council can do is still closely shaped by the political will of UN member states, although UN agencies have worked towards integrating nexus thinking at the core of their structure.
- Even if it might seem at first view that multilateralism can at times undermine nexus responses, the main gap might lie with multi-sectorial conversations and engagement. We need to re-think multilateralism, with a focus on multi-sectorial engagement.
- Development banks are now better at acknowledging the importance of tackling displacement, climate change, and conflict, and the need for comprehensive instruments to face these challenges. This is a positive trend for strengthening nexus responses, gaining

increasing appreciation by relevant stakeholders in the ML system as well as bilateral donors, and should be built on.

On delivering nexus responses

- To foster cross-sectorial collaboration, incentives need to shift. Working across silos based on integrated strategies and generating synergetic impact should be turned into key performance indicators.
- Policy success should be measured based on impact (which should also include preventive capacity), and not results. Future work should further focus on making impact measurable.
- While multilateral stakeholders have come a long way in bridging different policy communities, further investment should be channeled to mutual learning through continuous exchange of perspectives and expertise that all relevant actors (across the humanitarian, development, peace, security, defense, foreign policy spaces) can bring on the table. Enhanced dialogue and mutual learning has particular potential for improving joint capacity for multi-dimensional risk anticipation and prevention.
- Having a common problem statement and objectives – or at least a set of guiding principles – agreed upon by all actors responding to a crisis is essential for making nexus thinking work in practice. How to meet on common objectives, and more importantly, reconcile clashing ones?
- Joint programming is key, and starts with joint analyses based on shared data, where significant progress has been made. While better data allows for more relevant responses to crises, it should be also acknowledged that due to case-specific characteristics of different nexuses, it is very difficult to replicate best practices.
- Nexus responses require thinking simultaneously about different policy communities, timeframes and governance levels and how to best relate them. Systems approaches could provide better understanding on where and when particular actors can make a real difference, while networking of networks could be useful to identify correct complementarities and to enhance coordination.

