

Nexus²⁵ Memo

Nexus²⁵ Roundtable

Complex Crises in Complex Times:

Building Strategic Partnerships to Strengthen Multilateralism

Brussels, Tuesday, November 15, 2022

The shockwaves emanating from the Russian aggression against Ukraine illustrate how a single crisis could reverberate across borders, multiply concurring risk factors, and exacerbate global instability. The [Nexus²⁵](#) project convened researchers and practitioners for a roundtable in Brussels on November 15, 2022, to discuss the evolving role of the European Union (EU) and other multilateral actors in times of transnational and multidimensional crises. The roundtable is the last in a series of yearlong Nexus²⁵ events on multilateral responses to complex crises. Previous meetings were held at the Munich Security Conference, on the sidelines of the World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington, and over a two-day conference in Rome.

The closed-door conversation, moderated by IAI Director **Nathalie Tocci** and Center for American Progress Senior Fellow **Michael Werz**, generated a forthcoming discussion among EU officials, representatives from international organizations and civil society, and the Brussels think tank community. It aimed to answer questions on the future of multilateral engagement against the backdrop of worsening climate crises, severe food shortages, growing challenges to sustainable energy, unprecedented levels of displacement, and protracted conflicts globally, but also to take stock of positive developments with potential for reinvigorating multilateral cooperation, both at the EU-level and within the wider scope of multilateral governance.

Here are some of the key takeaways:

- Coordination is essential to establish shared concepts between policy sectors working on different dimensions of nexus issues. In addition, horizontal coordination is required to share expertise and fill capacity gaps. At the same time multilateral institutions need to continue building in-house capacities and expertise to address the multidimensional nature of nexus challenges.
- Further investment is needed to improve mechanisms facilitating the bi-directional flow of information between decision makers and stakeholders delivering responses on the ground. Comprehensive approaches require a global lens to nexus challenges. However, given the context-sensitive nature of these challenges, better coordination of strategy development and field perspectives are essential to design effective and tailored responses.
- While coordination is essential, it is not sufficient: The effective delivery of nexus responses requires top level leadership and a strong sense of the strategic direction. Guidance and clearly defined overall goals are crucial, including contributions the different policy sectors are expected to make and how to establish feasible cross-silo collaboration. Only with the right set of incentives will multi-sectoral and inter-institutional collaboration be successful. At the same time, leadership is effective only when there is ownership – the involvement of stakeholders when setting executive level goals and targets is therefore essential.

- The need for a stronger alignment of policy priorities and substantial degrees of ownership among the involved partners is illustrated by complex EU-Africa relations across a range of issues including migration and mobility, the green transition and sustainable food systems. Addressing these critical challenges requires open dialogue taking into account diverging interests, perspectives and expectations. Trade-offs, such as those between the green transition priorities endorsed by the EU and the industrialization agenda of African countries, have to be negotiated.
- SDGs provide one of the few multilateral frameworks that most of the world has signed up to. In the future, using the potential presented by this framework can help set the agenda, define common goals across nexus issues and achieve political support from a wide range of stakeholders.
- Despite notable progress regarding the availability and integration of data sources, benefits remain limited while shared data do not inform joint decisions and multi-sectorial strategies. A clear example is the existing gap between early warning systems and early action. While data collection and integration are useful for improved risk assessment and mitigation, political decision makers often have to manage uncertainty. Such ambiguity increasingly becomes the norm given the permanence of complex crisis scenarios.
- Over the past years, subsequent crises with their global repercussions have clearly established the need to simultaneously deal with short- and long-term questions, while considering the links and feedback loops between immediate responses and forward-looking decisions: Long-term planning alone cannot deal with sudden disruptions emanating from crises, while postponing long-term questions to focus on pressing emergencies risks missing the bigger picture. Few fora exist to develop strategies to manage inconsistencies and trade-offs between short- and long-term policies.
- The effects of the growing debt crisis impacting vulnerable countries is exacerbated by the pandemic and the current surges in food and energy prices. Potential payment default in times of food and energy access challenges should not be underestimated. In fact, this is a threat multiplier in many regions. The debt crisis further limits the fiscal capacity of vulnerable and emerging countries to address nexus challenges.
- The effects of the war in Ukraine have underscored the speed and density of inter-linkages of issue areas and global regions, requiring stakeholders to review organizational preparedness in the face of this new strategic environment. It is also highlighting the need for a better understanding of interconnected regional systems. This is a prerequisite to improving targeted measures of risk mitigation, resilience, and conflict prevention affecting the international system as a whole.