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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Triple Nexus and the Future of Multilateral Governance: Rethinking Coordination between Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Efforts

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ABSTRACT

The UN-orchestrated Triple Nexus – a multilateral endeavour to provide humanitarian-development-peace responses in fragile and conflict-affected contexts – embodies several features of the emerging trend towards governance through regime complexity. Praised for its multi-actorness inclusivity and cross-policy experimentalism, the Nexus approach has been criticised as an attempt to replicate top-down, neo-liberal templates to govern crises in the peripheries. We analyse the new evidence provided in this Special Issue, connecting it to the debate on the future of multilateral governance, against the decline of the Liberal International Order (LIO). Guarding against naïve expectations of the Nexus as a panacea to bridge cross-policy gaps and bring about inter-agency cooperation amidst increased geopolitical tensions, we discuss its potential to become a venue for an enlarged conversation among traditional and new players. While also compatible with pluralist scenarios, a progressive variety of the Nexus may well emerge in the UN context, between Western and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) players. Their shared understandings of civil and political rights offer a promising avenue to advance some forward-looking Nexus components, supportive of individual and nature-based rights, to govern the increased complexity of the current multiplex order.

The provision of cross-policy, coordinated responses to multifaceted crises in developing countries has been a hallmark of Bretton Woods (BW) institutions. Orchestrated by the UN in 2016 and endorsed by other major International Organisations (IOs) (Organisation for Economic Coordination and Development [OECD], European Union [EU], World Bank Group [WBG]), the Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus (HDP) policy concept is a recent example of the further institutionalisation of this trend. High praise or outright criticism have ensued, echoing the split between the supporters of an adjusted post-Washington Consensus on the one side, and anti-global, anti-Western discontents on the other. Beyond that divide, a multiplicity of debates has developed around the Nexus, within organisations and across issue-areas and governance levels. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have criticised both partner countries and major donors for their top-down, managerial approach (Devint 2020), the vague

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conceptualisation and piecemeal inclusion of peace elements, the problematic fine-tuning of financing cycles (Brown *et al.* 2024), and the limited results on localisation (Barakat and Milton 2020). In turn, humanitarians, development and peacebuilding experts have highlighted the risks of securitising, humanitarianising, or liberalising either of the three policy areas, to the (alleged) detriment of the others.

By directly engaging with these debates, we discuss the contributions to this Special Issue (SI), highlighting the advantages and challenges of the Nexus endeavour. In line with Eugenia Baroncelli (2023; 2024, this Special Issue), we elaborate on the typology of governance model that best describes the Nexus effort, arguing that it possesses both hierarchic regime-traits and global experimentalist governance (GXG) features. While eschewing simplistic expectations of the Nexus as a panacea to end seemingly 'intractable conflicts', and in line with the GXG ability to support multi-actor forms of non-traditional accountability (De Búrca *et al.* 2014, 484), we argue that the Nexus has the potential to become a venue for both new and old donors, to cooperate towards strengthening progressive components at the local level. Subsequently, we connect these Nexus-specific reflections to the International Relations (IR) debate on the future of the international order, arguing in favour of a nuanced perspective. In discussing the difficulties of including the peace leg in light of global power dynamics, we side neither with doomsday scenarios of competing blocs *à la* John Mearsheimer (2019), nor with the outright rejection of Nexus-based endeavours of anti-Western perspectives. We believe that, if appropriately reformed, the inclusive and adaptive experimentalist Nexus approach may offer a promising avenue to govern the complexity of the current global context.

This SI makes four innovative contributions to the current debate. First, it fosters a frank dialogue on the Nexus between academics and practitioners, and between academics from different approaches and disciplines: IR, IPE (International Political Economy), GG (Global Governance), as well as Development, Humanitarian and Peace-building-security studies. Second, it features new qualified findings, connecting the Nexus policy concept to its implementation. To the best of our knowledge, the Nexus literature is currently composed of grey contributions and only residually by academic studies (Barakat and Milton 2020; Baroncelli 2023; Brown *et al.* 2024; Howe 2019; Nguya and Siddiqui 2020; Cochrane and Wilson 2023). Instead, this SI convenes voices from different milieus and epistemologies (positivist and post-positivist), a feature that allows us to discuss competing Nexus interpretations from both theoretical and policy angles. Third, we include contributions from the Global South and Europe, with case studies that investigate Nexus policies and discourse in several countries and regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa [MENA], South-East Asia and Latin America). The intellectual contribution of the Southern perspectives is, we think, a necessary step to end the confinement of Southern voices to 'raw material' that still characterises IR and IPE (Smith 2020 in Bhambra *et al.* 2020), as most of the academic literature on the Nexus. Fourth, the SI sits at the intersection of two key debates, one on multilateral responses to complex development challenges, the other on the future of the international order. As such, it connects the IR and IPE-GG literatures on international cooperation and regime complexes to IR research on the post-hegemonic international context. As discussed below, this connection is key to make

sense of the impact that cross-cutting globalisations will have on the future of the international order (Acharya 2017).[1]

The next section situates the Nexus experiment in the context of the IR and GG literature on international cooperation, detailing its main institutional features and discussing key implications. In section three, we connect the institutional and political specificity of the Nexus to the broader debate on the future of the (Liberal) international order, focusing on the enduring relevance of liberal principles *vis à vis* alternative scenarios. Section four elaborates on three main themes that have emerged from the contributions to this SI: the role of non-state actors in Nexus implementation, the efforts to bridge the gap between humanitarian neutrality and peacebuilding engagement, and the challenge of integrating the peace leg. Section five discusses the policy implications of the results of this SI's collective effort. While cautioning against naïve expectations, particularly with respect to the inclusion of the peace component, we believe that the Nexus offers an innovative and contestable framework to advance transformative attempts to govern the complexity of the current global context. The Nexus' plural nature and the UN's stewardship offer a promising venue to forge coalitions between like-minded players from the Global South and Bretton Woods traditional donors, in support of progressive combined humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts.

Studying international cooperation through the Nexus in the era of regime complexity

Conceptualised by early liberal institutionalism as governments' rational responses to cross-national functional problems, single-institution regimes helped states to contain their reciprocal uncertainty under anarchy, reducing transaction costs from policy coordination in technical issue-areas, and ultimately enhancing the chances of cooperation (Keohane 1984). According to rational-choice liberal institutionalism, IOs operate primarily upon delegation by member states (MS) according to principal-agent modalities (Hawkins *et al.* 2006). On the other hand, in addition to shifting the focus on ideational processes and non-rational dynamics of regime creation, constructivist and historical-institutionalist research has demonstrated that IOs have variable degrees of autonomy *vis-à-vis* their MS, exploring new governance modes and dynamics of change (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Avant *et al.* 2010; Park and Vetterlein 2010).

In the post-Cold War era, particularly after the 2008 crisis, new agreements and institutions were layered on pre-existing ones, and regimes evolved into "regime complexes", or "arrays of partially overlapping and nonhierarchical institutions that include more than one international agreement or authority" (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 329), as a result of more frequent systemic shocks, increased issue density and task expansion (Biermann and Koops 2017; Bretherton and Vogler 2006). Referring to both the scholarly approach and its empirical referent, regime complexity (RC) advances "a new conceptualization of the international politics of cooperation", characterised by "the densely

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[1]According to Acharya (2017), the Multiplex World envisions a more pluralistic and diversified architecture of global governance, characterised by the proliferation of transnational challenges, the diffusion of new ideas and the expansion of actors and processes at the centre of global governance.

institutionalized international environment where states and non-state actors interact" (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 346). The politics of international cooperation has changed in several respects, as new rules, institutions and authority claims have populated the same issue-area or have expanded their reach across multiple issue-areas (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009). Challenging the single-issue, single-institution model of hierarchical governance typical of earlier discrete regimes (Keohane and Victor 2011), governance through RC has triggered competitive, and at times conflicting, authority claims by new elemental institutions within the same regime complex (Alter and Raustiala 2018; Drezner 2013; Henning 2019), while also stimulating learning and innovative change (Heldt and Schmidtke 2019; Baroncelli 2021). Indirect governance by orchestration has entailed the "creation, support and integration of a multi-actor system of indirect governance, to pursue common goals that neither the orchestrator nor the orchestrated players would be able to achieve separately" (Abbott *et al.* 2015, 4). Horizontal and network-based schemes have supported cooperation between public and private actors against the background of international anarchy (Falkner 2016).

In turn, while long a subject of study in IPE (Keohane and Nye 1972) and early cognitivist regime theories (Haas *et al.* 1993), the role of non-state actors attracted renewed scholarly attention in the post-Cold War from both IR and public policy research (Mosley 2009; Slaughter 2004). Contemporary IR studies on the governance of global commons have fully embraced this transnational dimension. Research on climate diplomacy, or on the governance of transnational crime, for example, openly goes beyond both the domestic-international bifurcation (typical of early structural-modified and neo-realist studies) and the states-IOs dichotomy of liberal and constructivist studies. In the same vein, international adaptation and mitigation of environmental and health challenges ('global public bads') have been studied through GXG (De Búrca *et al.* 2014; Sabel and Victor 2022), and through political ecology models (Leach *et al.* 2021). While not discarding earlier rational-choice approaches, these strands have complemented them through insights from policy-analytic, sociological, development and natural sciences research.

Marked by an explicit normative dimension, these inter-disciplinary approaches to the study of HDP governance consider access to basic resources and peace as quintessential examples of Global Public Goods (GPGs) (Kaul *et al.* 1999). Systematic under-provision occurs at the domestic level in the most fragile contexts, but also has distinctive international sources and profound global consequences. There are now many institutional innovations that have emerged at the transnational level to meet such complex cross-policy challenges. Irrespective of either their ethical justification (solidarism), political advisability (pluralism) or performance achievements, they warrant further academic investigation.[2]

Similar to the dynamics that have occurred in the climate change regime in the post-2015 phase (Falkner 2016), this article argues that states and, particularly, non-state actors have become increasingly significant players in HDP issues. As occurred following 9/11, but with the benefit of hindsight of 20+ years of 'neo-liberal peacekeeping' and development support to post-conflict transitions, the HDP efforts of major industrialised

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[2]A brief overview of the debate between pluralists and solidarists in the IR English School, also referring to the legitimacy and advisability of humanitarian intervention, is provided by Bain (2018).

countries have developed exponentially. Fears about transnational terrorist attacks, global economic instability since 2008, and the effects of conflict- and climate-related migration surges in the 2010s, have been reflected – with varying fortunes – in those endeavours. Compared to previous decades, coordinated initiatives have received unprecedented institutional attention at the multilateral level. Guided by its Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the UN has provided a basis for HDP efforts to be coordinated under the Triple Nexus umbrella (Guterres 2016), through its Agenda for Humanity (2016) and New Way of Working (2017). Almost two years after the Covid-19 global pandemic, a renewed call in support of a more effective, networked and inclusive multilateralism was issued by the UN in 2021, in the Secretary General's 'Our Common Agenda' blueprint.

This SI features contributions on the HDP Nexus in several regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, Southeast Asia, Latin America) by authors from and based in different geographical areas (Latin America, MENA, Southern Europe), who also adopt different scholarly approaches. Some acknowledge their IR globalist (Deciancio *et al.*), constructivist (Sigillò; Tinti) or liberal-institutionalist allegiances (Baroncelli). Others employ critical and de-colonial perspectives (Nascimento and Pureza) or a political-economy empirical lens (Guiu and Siddiqui). All agree that the old paradigm according to which "states [create] discrete regimes to solve discrete problems" is unsuitable for analysing the governance of the current global context (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 330). Focusing on the Nexus endeavour, this SI explores the potential that these attempts at governing complexity through multi-actor and cross-policy approaches can bring to shape the responses to major HDP crises.

In line with previous studies, however, the Nexus analyses in this SI reveal the difficulties encountered in the coordination of compound responses at different governance levels. On the one side, heterarchic and GXG traits have emerged as distinctive features (Baroncelli 2023; 2024, this Special Issue). The Nexus' constitutive emphasis on localisation (Barakat and Milton 2020) has been instrumental to enhancing the agency of previously excluded players, unlocking their transformative impact in Nexus implementation. On the other, hierarchical, agency- and sector-specific ('siloed') approaches have persisted during and after Covid-19, limiting the benefits and emancipatory potential of the Nexus endeavour (Devint 2020; Hilhorst and Mena 2021).

While we expect that this institutional mix will persist, the evidence presented in this SI allows us to elaborate more specifically on four implications of the Nexus approach to global governance, on both theoretical and policy grounds. First, we find that, as reflected in the RC literature, the 'absence of hierarchy' qualifier mainly holds compared to a 'single regime' benchmark but is, otherwise, hypothetical and very much a matter of degrees. The role of experts in each of the three Nexus fields and the autonomy of different IOs managements (especially the UN orchestrator and other major BW multilaterals) *vis à vis* states is substantial. We also find that non-state actors have to some extent gained leverage in Nexus implementation and monitoring, thus acquiring greater negotiating skills and bargaining margins across the three policy spaces. Second, the Nexus GXG effort has increased flexibility across financing windows and supply of new resources, prompting greater responsiveness by the UN, OECD-DAC MS and WBG, as examples of virtuous cooperation in Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) indicate (Dalrymple and Hanssen 2020; Baroncelli 2024,

this Special Issue). However, in spite of the UN orchestration, inter-agency coordination has not always materialised. The decentralised authority structure of the Nexus endeavour has allowed an independent approach by the EU, a choice that, in our opinion, has weakened the transformative potential of the joined-up nature of Nexus efforts. Third, the multi-faceted evidence and positions advanced in this SI indicate that the diffusion of authority across a wider – and more differentiated – set of actors has furthered a fruitful contestation of the Nexus concept and its potential. Fourth, however, increased complexity in the Nexus division of labour and a still nebulous understanding of the peace dimension (itself a contested, adaptable concept) has at times increased the leverage of already powerful actors, as predicted by Realist understandings of RC (Drezner 2013), generating instability and less-than-progressive results on the ground.

The Triple Nexus and the debate on the future of the (Liberal) international order

In addition to the caveats discussed above, critics consider the Nexus as another top-down attempt to channel neo-liberal technocratic responses to problems that are essentially political, in contexts where orders are contested and unduly appropriated by external actors (Cochrane and Wilson 2023; Singh and Banerjee 2024; Nascimento and Pureza 2024, this Special Issue). Orchestrated by the UN and championed by the EU, the OECD-DAC and the WBG, the Nexus three-pronged effort may thus merely pour old wine into new bottles. Efforts by non-DAC donors (Barrowclough *et al.* 2020) are currently far from matching the scope and ambition of the Nexus. While overcoming the biased 'gift'-based logic of Western aid, Indian and Chinese development approaches have replicated the top-down templates of BW-led endeavours, championing the political priorities of new donors (Mawdsley 2012). However, alternative approaches to peacebuilding and regional development have emerged, particularly in Latin America (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012), widening the conversation beyond the West-Rest outdated dichotomy and enhancing the Nexus' transformative dimensions (Deciancio *et al.* 2024, this Special Issue). If appropriately reformed and backed by a critical majority of like-minded players, the Nexus may provide a unique framework to address the root causes of HDP challenges. Cautious optimism suggests that innovative avenues can be tested through the Nexus, coordinating the supply of interconnected global public goods that also support the agency of local players in peripheral regions.

Alternatively, pessimists in the Realist camp claim that the challenging return of geopolitics (Schindler *et al.* 2023), the weaponisation of economic interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019) and minilateral responses to global crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Fazal 2020), make *any* multilateral response to compound crises doomed to failure (Mearsheimer 2019). State-centered IR approaches view regime complexes, and the GXG Nexus endeavour among them, as a losing game. No state-based Nexus champion has emerged so far and coordination is left to the inter-governmental UN or OECD-DAC venues. Scepticism about the future of multilateral cooperation appears to be confirmed by the ideological heterogeneity of the current international system, populated by a rising number of autocracies and electoral democracies, *vis à vis* a shrinking group of liberal democracies, mostly confined to the Western camp.

Pluralist scenarios are however entirely compatible with these dynamics (Buzan 2004), as is a Nexus approach to the global governance of HDP crises. As discussed above, the Nexus accommodates both Western and non-Western governments and may well offer a third way – between the stark alternative of siding either with the United States (US) or the People's Republic of China (PRC) – along a UN-orchestrated approach to indirect governance. As in most post-Washington Consensus endeavours (notably the SDGs), neither democracy nor political rights are mentioned in the Nexus framework. We consider this a symptom of the hollowing out of the LIO from within at the multilateral level, while other contributors to this SI read it more critically, as the latest evolution of a "liberal empire in denial" (Nascimento and Pureza 2024, this Special Issue), that has now shifted the responsibility to peripheral communities through a "humanitarianism of containment" (Donini 2010). In terms of policy, however, there is some consensus that the current 'hands-off' UN approach of indirect governance through the Nexus provides an opportunity to strengthen the agency of governmental actors outside the Western camp (Baroncelli 2024; Deciancio *et al.* 2024; Tinti 2024; Guiu and Siddiqui 2024, all this Special Issue).

The Nexus fallibility awareness (De Búrca *et al.* 2014) and its flexible yet ultimately managerial nature, are at once a strength and a limitation. Its technocratic (allegedly non-political) character provides new stakeholders with institutional opportunities to promote their agendas. Its method-like features and decentralised, indirect authority structures, however, make it particularly susceptible to institutional capture. The replication of top-down control dynamics by local powerholders, or by the most vocal among competing NGOs, and cases of 'epistemic violence' bear witness to this risk (Deciancio *et al.* 2024; Tinti 2024; Sigillò 2024; Nascimento and Pureza 2024, all this Special Issue).

Different from Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's analysis (2023), and in agreement with others (Shifrinson *et al.* 2023), we also believe that the current power distribution does not approximate a unipolar configuration. Additionally, and consistent with the RC literature, we consider states as key players that operate in multi-actor contexts, where power is often fragmented across issue-areas and authority organised along a variety of lines. While inter-state war has resurfaced in continental Europe since 2022, intra-state conflicts have been the norm in the peripheries of both the US and the Soviet Union's spheres of influence, during and after the Cold War. Our point is that, as much as conflict is a key dimension of transnational politics, so is peace, as well as development and humanitarian efforts towards it. Cooperative practices are as much a fact of international politics as conflictual ones. Overall, and through the exploration of Nexus-informed policies, this SI hopes to overcome the 'conflict-cooperation' binary logic that characterised earlier Realist-Liberal debates, providing insights to advance research on both international and transnational processes of power contestation and cooperation. While states remain key actors, IOs have played foundational roles in the orchestration of the Nexus (the UN), in the definition of its agenda (UN, EU, OECD Secretariat) and in its overall implementation (Baroncelli 2024, this Special Issue). Additionally, the experimentalist features of the Nexus (horizontal ties, iterated deliberative/participative interaction, open-ended goals) are – at least in principle – an opportunity for a plurality of actors in developing contexts to redefine the rules of the game (Deciancio *et al.* 2024, this Special Issue). This applies with respect to progressive NGOs and pro-poor private sector players, but also with reference to hybrid actors,

including armed groups on the ground, which may operate either in support of, or against, the Nexus' complex peace goals (Baroncelli 2024; Guiu and Siddiqui 2024, both this Special Issue).

Equally, we believe that power-based conceptualisations should be complemented with institutionalist and ideational analyses that have a contextual (regional, local) underpinning. In line with recent IR and IPE research, we concur that contextualisation can be achieved only if the conversation is open to perspectives that go beyond mainstream Western theories and that purposefully de-centre US and Euro-centric perspectives (Acharya 2017; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Attinà 2021). If scholarly research on the Nexus responses to the complex, yet context-specific crises that punctuate the globe is to advance, contributions from non-Western IR and development studies should be added to traditional IR approaches (Deciancio *et al.* 2024; Nascimento and Pureza 2024, both this Special Issue; Acharya 2012).

Regional approaches to the management of compound crises have often looked at the EU template and its potential to externalise an original path to peace, putting substantial economic weight in service of very ambitious political goals. Democratic anchoring during the post-Soviet enlargements (Magen and Morlino 2008), a new approach to development policymaking since the 2000s (Carbone 2007) and, in the case of the war in Ukraine, open support to neighbours under direct military attack (Slaughter 2023 in Shifrinson *et al.* 2023), are examples of the EU's successful external action. More broadly, and unlike the US democratic peacebuilding at gunpoint, they have suggested that a regional actor can externalise an essentially domestic governance approach to support freedom, prosperity and peace, through peaceful, rights-based and collaborative methods. Also, unlike Washington Consensus prescriptions, the EU's approach to development has relied on positive, as opposed to negative conditionality (Baroncelli 2019). While at times incoherent (particularly in the trade-development and migration-development dimensions), the EU's external role has approximated that of a civilian power, endowed with an unparalleled ability to re-imagine the synergy between economic and political integration based on common liberal-democratic values (Lucarelli and Manners 2006). These beliefs, though, are not shared in other areas of the world, where democracy appears less appealing and national priorities are more relevant than societal, let alone individual ones. Beyond the 'liberal-democratic vs authoritarian' dichotomy, however, distinct approaches have developed on regional integration (see Acharya [2012]; Riggirozzi and Tussie [2012]; Deciancio *et al.* [2024], this Special Issue, on the experience of Latin America) and, according to some, different paths have been adopted to the external action of regional organisations (Rached [2019] on the role of Brazil within the BRICS bloc, via the New Development Bank [NDB]).

Considering such diversity, a Nexus approach cannot offer a ready-made template and may not be as effective as hoped by its multilateral architects. Nonetheless, it appears more viable than the quasi-hegemonic supply of US post-conflict development support in the unipolar moment (Coyne 2008; Richmond 2021).[3] Compared to that period, the US leadership is currently weaker and (much) more contested. In our opinion, shared

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[3]While some agree that the 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer 1990) ended in 2022 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, others believe that the US still remains at the top of global power hierarchies (see Brooks and Wohlforth [2023], and the ensuing debate in Shifrinson *et al.* [2023]).

chairmanship between like-minded partners is essential to provide transformative responses to the complex challenges that punctuate the HDP triple-policy space. The alternative of disjointed regional solutions would usher in potentially very different scenarios. While considering the Nexus approach too vague and repetitive of previous top-down practices, practitioners in the Philippines have indeed argued about its potential to unlock more cohesive funding to support long-term strategies in disaster-stricken contexts (Tinti 2024, this Special Issue). Similarly, the empowerment of local communities through participatory Nexus practices may be pursued along the progressive experiences developed in the last two decades by some South American and Caribbean players (Deciancio *et al.* 2024, this Special Issue). In those contexts, democracy has evolved on par with more advanced conceptions of indigenous and natural rights, and post-capitalist alternatives have been crafted to pursue environmental sustainability and participatory processes, as shown by the examples of Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia (Ibid). On the contrary, if we are to judge by the PRC's BRI (Belt-and-Road-Initiative) 'development by infrastructure support', or by its 'no strings attached' economic penetration in resource-rich countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, we are left with an equally unsatisfactory alternative. As exemplified by the analysis of green militarism in the Philippines (Tinti 2024, this Special Issue) and in contrast to the UN last resort principle, an even more questionable approach is currently followed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework for multilateral disaster response mechanisms, that relies on coordination among MS military forces as a default solution (Canyon *et al.* 2017). Similarly, the limited or counterproductive achievements of ASEAN in Myanmar, as well as the efforts of the East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the DRC, suggest that approaches to peacebuilding by non-Western players very much encounter the same obstacles faced by UN peacekeepers and US-led military efforts in the past (Baroncelli 2024, this Special Issue).

Regretting the US hegemonic decline, critics of the LIO have an equally bleak outlook (Mearsheimer 2019). Yet, despite the regressive trajectory of US democracy, we believe that the LIO core principles stand as the highest multilateral attempt at pursuing basic guarantees of human integrity and prosperity. Similarly, a reformed institutional compact under UN leadership – the most global among existing IOs – appears to some as the best hope for a more peaceful, free and prosperous future (Ikenberry 2018).

For that to happen, however, the LIO will have to deal with two of its major failures: the exclusion of most in the Global South (Acharya 2017; Buzan and Acharya 2021; Jahn 2018; Lipscy and Lee 2019; Richmond 2021) and of many of the lower and middle classes in industrialised democracies (Goldstein and Gulotty 2021; Parsi 2021; Piketty 2014). This requires a radical reformulation of the compromise of embedded liberalism (Ruggie 1982; Abdelal and Ruggie 2009; Helleiner 2019). Critics in the Liberal camp contend that the decline owes much to unfulfilled promises of the LIO. In particular, the neoliberal approach to crisis management routinely prescribed by the BW International financial institutions under the Washington Consensus template in the 1980s, 1990s and, to some extent, the 2000s, markedly contrasted with the originally envisaged 'embedded' – that is, state-regulated – Keynesian approach to crises that had dominated between the late 1940s and the 1970s (Stiglitz 2002). In turn, critical theorists, constructivists and post-colonial scholars, have criticised the imposition of a (culturally) biased liberal-hegemonic order outside the Western world (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). There, contextual conditions and historical legacies would have perhaps led to very

different trajectories had states, leaders and citizens been free from the imperial and post-imperial tutelages of the Pax Britannica and Pax Americana.

In this SI we hope to provide additional insights into the broader debate on the erosion of the LIO (Ikenberry 2018; Parsi 2021), on its resilience (Lucarelli 2022) and on the alleged return of power-based bounded orders (Mearsheimer 2019). Far from being 'low politics', according to a prominent non-Western IR scholar, development policy-making appears to be supplanting trade policy and may well become the new priority in foreign economic policy agendas of major players, in a multiplex order inhabited by cross-cutting globalisms (Acharya 2017). With its humanitarian and peace components, the Triple Nexus provides a venue to widen the conversation on development financing beyond strictly economic parameters, in a context that is open to deliberative practices across multiple governance levels and among very different actors. The UN's orchestration is in our opinion the best guarantee that a rule-based approach is followed, and that inclusive and transformative goals remain the lodestars of a genuinely plural process.

Unpacking the Nexus: synergistic innovation under higher complexity

Among the Nexus practices and discourses analysed in this SI, three merit further attention on both research and policy counts: the key role of humanitarian NGOs and development practitioners, the tensions between humanitarian neutrality and political engagement required by peacebuilding and development efforts, and, finally, the challenging inclusion of the peace leg. While we argue in favour of a holistic understanding of the Nexus, the contributions to this SI confirm earlier findings: involving non-state actors in fragile, conflict and violence affected-countries (FCV) requires carefully targeted efforts to obtain synergistic outcomes, especially with respect to peacebuilding endeavours (Pouligny 2005).

A major strength of the Nexus concept is its embrace of the interplay between HDP compound responses to needs that, while multidimensional, are by necessity perceived as unitary by local actors. Whereas traditional humanitarian action supplies immediate relief with little concern for the structural determinants of crises, the Nexus approach requires "a mindset shift" (ODI 2024, 3) and constant flexibility between short, medium and long-term endeavours, to address the root causes of conflicts and support sustainable solutions (Tronc *et al.* 2019; Ferris 2020).

Early Nexus calls originated among humanitarians, yet NGOs in all the three HDP legs have supported its integrated framework. From a non-governmental perspective, Nexus efforts disseminate information and enhance coordination across otherwise parallel tracks, potentially reducing duplications and maximising the effectiveness of locally-led responses. When feasible, cooperation around the Nexus has also enabled complementary specialisation by large IOs and bilaterals (Baroncelli 2024, this Special Issue). On several counts, the Nexus' emphasis on bottom-up dynamics has supported paradigmatic shifts in cross-policy efforts in Cameroon and the DRC (Baroncelli 2024, this Special Issue). Overall, identifying the source of specific needs allows NGOs to focus on their respective comparative advantages, addressing vulnerabilities (humanitarian) while at the same time strengthening local capacities (development). Most particularly, in FCV contexts, where there are no IOs resident representatives, NGOs are the sole agents through which Nexus activities can be implemented.

NGOs perform crucial roles in crisis response, during natural disasters and conflicts, providing essentials such as food, water, shelter and healthcare. Their close interaction with local communities allows an early identification of priorities and ensures that programmes are co-designed in multiple policy areas. In most cases, NGOs are the first and last resort of local communities for both emergency relief and structural needs, and their role in 'double Nexus' (humanitarian-development) endeavours is key to empowering communities and improving their long-term wellbeing (Schloms 2003; Davies 2019). By promoting participatory approaches and community ownership, NGOs restore trust in local institutions, providing essential intermediation in peacebuilding processes (ODI 2024). As proven by pioneering studies on Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, the role of NGOs is pivotal in supporting the inclusion of the poor and marginalised in governmental programmes. This applies to contexts of weak state capacity, but also to mature institutional environments, such as the EU, with respect to migrants and refugees (Rugendyke 2007).

However, the Nexus governance structure puts an additional burden on NGOs to pursue community dialogue and advocacy towards other Nexus partners (governments, IOs). In relation to the Philippines' approach to disaster management, Alessandro Tinti (2024, this Special Issue) highlights the benefits of NGO-led community-driven practices over military-led or purely intergovernmental humanitarian-development responses, a finding that supports the integration of disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks within the Nexus approach (Mena *et al.* 2022). While governments remain key players in disaster management, their delegation of authority to the military indicates that heterarchical traits (civilian-military ministries) intertwine with collusive dynamics on the ground. More problematic, the constrained space for civil society organisations (CSOs) and the prioritisation of counter-insurgency agendas in the disaster-response strategies elaborated by the military, has greatly diminished the support provided to the agency of local communities, fueling perceptions about the Nexus as 'old wine in new bottles'.

As Daniela Nascimento and José Manuel Pureza (2024, this Special Issue) argue in their article on the Palestinian and Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, and South Sudanese and Congolese refugees in Uganda, the Nexus approach – and the role played by intermediating NGOs – should be radically rethought. Their findings confirm earlier evidence on "the micro-physics of power in humanitarian arenas" (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010, 1137), where power differentials have triggered regressive dynamics altogether. Traditional HDP programmes, they maintain, should be entirely reshaped and adapted to local needs if they are designed to empower individuals and strengthen their resilience (a concept that Nascimento and Pureza further contest). While Nexus cash-for-work benefits have helped Syrian refugees to engage in the improvement of camp infrastructures and economic activities, such efforts have not always empowered them in progressive fashions. 'Campzenship' (Sigona 2015) has become the new normal, and Nexus localisation has magnified containment effects to the detriment of refugees' positive recovery. The role that NGOs can play in this respect – advocating different solutions with host authorities and major donors alike – could be crucial.

Among non-state players involved in Nexus activities in conflict-affected countries there are also armed groups with aims that markedly contrast with the UN-sponsored HDP approach. Examining a variety of practices and traditions, this SI sheds further light on the tensions between humanitarian neutrality and peacebuilding political

engagement. Among humanitarians, the debate centres on the difficulty of upholding fundamental principles (neutrality, impartiality, independence) while at the same time adapting to sudden changes in highly fragile contexts. Humanitarian IOs and NGOs engage with political actors to gain access and ensure the safety of their staffs, while striving to ensure separation between humanitarian and political objectives. Ultimately, they are among the most exposed actors in FCV contexts, and have often been the victims of attacks against civilians. Additionally, in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Sri Lanka, violence against NGO staffs has gone beyond indiscriminate acts of terrorism. There, the presence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) has conditioned the perceptions of local populations against humanitarian workers, who have often been seen as proxies of Western hegemonic power, ultimately becoming the target of deliberate violence (Irrera 2019).

Based on novel data on post-ISIL Iraq, Nadia Siddiqui and Rodger Guiu (2024, this Special Issue) investigate the failure of top-down state-led Nexus endeavours, in the presence of non-state actors operating on the basis of delegated responsibilities to protect civilians. Discretionality at the local level, in both authority delegation and eligibility criteria for returnees, has negatively affected Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) programmes, at times preventing the return of displaced families connected to ISIL fighters. Far from 'doing no harm', the Nexus localisation has in this case confined the protection of civilians in the hands of those very NSAGs seeking retribution. A principled *sine-qua non* of compound responses to complex crises, conflict sensitivity is very difficult to implement in practice (Cochrane and Wilson 2023). Short of conflict amplification, other unintended consequences have been the erosion of local systems and even environmental degradation (Tinti 2024, this Special Issue). Research on the 'everyday politics of aid' also shows that no humanitarian actor in search of legitimacy and resources (IO, NGO, local powerholder) is in principle exempt from the risk of perverse appropriation of humanitarian goals (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). In Syria, humanitarian agencies were not able to prevent the upsurge of IDPs and the proliferation of new NSAGs. In the DRC, the integration of former rebel factions into the national army with no prior training has resulted in the growth of armed groups within the security forces and ongoing human rights abuses. In Colombia, the signing of a peace agreement between the government and *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) rebels in 2016 has left a power vacuum in rural areas, readily appropriated by other NSAGs involved in drug trafficking (Alther 2006).

This evidence relates to the third major theme that has emerged from all the contributions to this SI: the challenges of including the peace leg. Adding to the different beliefs on appropriate humanitarian action and effective development support, respectively, multiple peace understandings by different Nexus actors have further complicated the dialogue between practitioners in the three policy sectors. Negative peace (or the absence of war, often referred to as 'big P' – as in 'high politics' peace) has been opposed to positive peace conceptions (Galtung 1969) (that is, the opportunity to build trust and transformative bonds towards a better coexistence, indicated with 'small p' – as in day-to-day processes of inter-communal dialogue and transformative political processes at the local level). Several outcomes have occurred, including piecemeal progress at the local level, a reluctance to mention peace goals in official documents and outright failures. It is however revealing that pioneering Nexus

research has focused on Afghanistan, possibly one of the most blatant Western debacles in the provision of joint HDP support (Howe 2019). While this case arguably warrants further research, it is important to summarise here the three main conclusions from the articles of this SI.

First, whilst cross-policy synergies exist between humanitarian, development and peace processes, they are never progressive when they are appropriated by exclusionary elites, or in service of securitarian agendas that sacrifice peace to (broader) stabilisation and containment needs. No ready-made HDP package can solve deeply entrenched political contestation, let alone end wars or prevent military escalations.

The idea that coordinated socio-economic schemes in fragile contexts would automatically support peace and stability had already been questioned by the end of the 2000s (Richmond 2021). Yet, as discussed by Ester Sigillò (2024, this Special Issue) on the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) in Tunisia between 2013 and 2016, Western donors (the EU, UN and WBG) embarked on a sustained provision of socio-economic support to advance democratisation and defuse jihadi radicalisation at the same time. As it turned out, short-term stabilisation objectives appeased the containment needs of external actors, while long-term transformation towards more equal and peaceful orders remained wishful thinking, as Nexus processes were appropriated by extractive leaders. More troubling, the competition induced between local NGOs by EU and WBGs funding schemes fueled despair and defeatism, increasing the incentives for young people to enlist in radical Islamic groups.

The 'P' in the Nexus policy triad also stands for 'politics' (Moorehead 2022). Like democratic stabilisation programmes in the 1990s and 2000s, securitised support to social solidarity via the funding of local CSOs has had limited or adverse effects. Externally engineered transitions, and the expectation that bureaucratic non-governmental intermediaries could address essentially political conundrums through depoliticised, 'technical' support schemes, have been part of the problem (Sigillò 2024; Nascimento and Pureza 2024, both this Special Issue). Well known to development practitioners, the provision of support to the 'dark side' of civil society or to corrupt leaders, has delayed solutions pushing the poorest and most marginalised into possibly worse conditions. The redefinition of authority patterns entailed by the Nexus GXG approach has in this case provided (already) powerful actors with (even) greater leverage, working against the most vulnerable.

In relation to the above, our second insight is that progress on the peace leg also crucially depends on the willingness of the Nexus orchestrator (UN) and main multilateral supporters (EU, WBG) to set aside the differences that have at times impaired their coordination. Progress on Nexus implementation also rests on their ability to cooperate towards value-forward goals. BW multilaterals share a substantial consensus on human rights protection and on the importance of environmental and social sustainability. They also enjoy a wide convening power, financial means and potential legitimacy base. While Brussels' choice of autonomy bears witness to its distinctive approach, and may also be more welcome to non-Western partners compared to WBG Nexus endeavours (often associated with old Washington Consensus methods), the cost of the EU independent action is also one of reduced diplomatic leverage in the dialogue with partner countries.

Third, while integrating the peace leg has certainly raised the stakes attached to HDP joint efforts compared to the era of 'double Nexus' endeavors, it has also opened up new opportunities. Admittedly, the triple Nexus formula puts a higher responsibility on the

ability of the three HDP communities to bridge the cross-policy gaps addressed above (humanitarian neutrality vs political engagement, short-term relief vs long-term structural solutions, securitarian stabilisation vs transformative empowerment). Overall, however, we believe that it represents an opportunity for Nexus players and stakeholders at different governance levels to widen the space for a more plural, context-sensitive and progressive understanding of the Nexus policy concept and implementation.

Conclusion

A cross-policy, inter-agency endeavour to govern compound HDP responses in FCV contexts, the UN-orchestrated 'Triple Nexus' is a highly ambitious effort to achieve the sort of inclusive, networked and effective multilateralism advocated in 2021 by the United Nations Secretary General's 'Our Common Agenda' blueprint.

Similar to cooperation in the governance of climate change, the Nexus approximates several features of GXG, an approach that appears particularly suited to coordinate responses to complex global crises, where constant feedbacks between different governance levels are required to support continuous adaptation to changing conditions on the ground. The lessons learned from past 'double Nexus' efforts in post-conflict contexts, we argue, have further informed the elaboration of the HDP concept along experimentalist lines. Its multi-actor and multi-sector features, in particular its indirect governance by orchestration and open-ended goals, contrast with earlier single-sector, single-organisation vertical regime approaches. Still a work-in-progress (hierarchical, organisation- and policy-specific efforts remain the norm in several cases), the Nexus endeavour is in our opinion an innovative attempt at governing the complexity of the current global context.

The Nexus experimental features have opened a plural policy space that is more contestable and open to new actors, governmental and non-governmental. Increased opportunities have arisen for NGOs, in FCV countries where non-state actors are the only providers on the ground. While tension remains between humanitarian impartiality and peacebuilding engagement, the evidence indicates that Nexus programmes have improved the synergy between development and relief actions, while also empowering peripheral actors. On different counts, however, major difficulties mar the incorporation of the peace leg into Nexus activities. Blind localisation and the empowerment of local militias have slowed down progress in such contexts as post-ISIL Iraq or the DRC. Regressive coalitions between major donors and authoritarian elites have weakened the pro-poor and de-radicalisation effects of social cohesion programmes in Tunisia, or have magnified dynamics of 'humanitarian containment' in refugee camps in Jordan and Uganda.

The role of the UN will be crucial to advance a transformative understanding of the Nexus. While facing considerable difficulties in the provision of collective security, the UN wields first-rate humanitarian stewardship and unparalleled orchestration abilities. Overall, and different from the OECD, the UN offers a unique venue where the Nexus politics and practice are backed by a nearly universal membership. The role of major Western players – particularly Team Europe and the WBG – remains crucial, to provide political traction to the dialogue with partner countries, and unrivalled development support behind the most progressive components of the Nexus – notably an understanding that privileges human security and the protection of basic political and civil

rights. At the same time, however, we believe that the UN's role will also be key to support transformative alternatives provided by Southern approaches to the Nexus.

In contrast to the bleak prognoses of Realist and Post-Structuralist LIO critics, we think that a progressive coalition can be formed around the Nexus concept among like-minded partners, on the shared concepts of solidarity and freedom, and in favour of basic civil and political rights. We also believe that forward-looking ideas, developed in the Nexus experiences from Latin America and the Caribbean described in this SI, could bring substantial support to Nexus policies and much-needed correctives to previous neo-liberal excesses, particularly in the protection of indigenous and natural rights. While some post-capitalist alternatives suggested by those experiences may appear unviable in the context of most contemporary Western economic systems, we believe that they advance very promising approaches to the environmental sustainability and participatory processes of the future.

Finally, however, we wish to guard against a naïve understanding of the Nexus potential. We live in an era of increased geopolitical divides. US hegemony has unmistakably declined and gaps have widened between Western powers, on one side, and emerging powers, most notably the PRC, on the other. The Triple Nexus was born amidst rising migration flows and heightened military tensions in the Global South. Almost ten years later, war has reached the borders of Europe and economic interdependence has been increasingly weaponised on a global scale. Unlike the experiences in LAC, Asian and African peacebuilding efforts analysed in this SI (ASEAN in Myanmar, EAC and SADC in the DRC) have made very limited progress or generated counterproductive results. While this does not obscure the failures of the US- and UN-led efforts, it should serve as a reminder that African and Asian actors often face obstacles that are very similar to those encountered by Western players.

Different scenarios may unfold depending on which understanding of the Nexus prevails. Little doubt exists, however, that development cooperation has become a prominent component of the foreign policies of major powers in a multiplex order that is increasingly populated by cross-cutting globalisms. As discussed above, the studies featured in this SI incorporate new evidence from (once) peripheral actors, and provide theoretical insights to widen the conversation beyond mainstream IR and IPE analyses of the HDP GXG approach. Progress on 'small p' (positive peace) is as difficult to attain as gains on the 'big P' (negative peace) track. It also depends very much on the ability of key players to form progressive coalitions in support of the transformative dimensions of the Nexus. This SI, we hope, adds new evidence to support that effort.

Acknowledgements

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