



Q&A: The ICRC and the “humanitarian–development–peace nexus” discussion

In conversation with Filipa Schmitz Guinote, ICRC Policy Adviser

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Over the past five years, various developments in the international aid policy sphere have resurfaced a decades-old discussion about the link between humanitarian action, development and peace efforts – the so-called “triple nexus”. This discussion focuses on protracted conflicts and fragile settings, as these are environments where humanitarian funding and response are overstretched and where development and peace struggle to take hold.

Three important reference points in this policy environment are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ the Agenda for Humanity² and the twin United Nations (UN) resolutions on sustaining peace.³ These various commitments have been driving development actors to seek ways to engage earlier and remain present in conflict-affected areas.⁴ They have mobilized many donors and organizations around a vision in which humanitarian action works to reduce needs, risks and vulnerability, in addition to responding to needs,⁵ and they have spurred the UN

system into organizational reforms to ensure a system-wide coherent effort towards the SDGs, including in places affected by conflict.⁶ They have also been accompanied by renewed calls for, and efforts towards, greater transparency, efficiency, accountability, collaboration and results across the international aid system.

Efforts to achieve the right synergy between humanitarian action, development and peace efforts have again regained momentum globally. But they have also raised concerns within the humanitarian community about a shrinking space for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action during armed conflict.

In this Q&A, Policy Adviser Filipa Schmitz Guinote discusses the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) policy reflections on the interface between humanitarian action, development and peace, and the so-called "triple nexus" discussion. She unpacks some of the conceptual and practical tensions around humanitarian principles and humanitarian identity in the interaction between humanitarian, development and peace actors. She also outlines the rationale behind the ICRC's work with affected people in protracted conflicts, against the backdrop of an ICRC Institutional Strategy which commits the organization to building sustainable humanitarian impact with affected people and working with others.

Keywords: humanitarian response, humanitarian–development divide, humanitarian–development–peace nexus, protracted conflict, humanitarian principles, partnerships.



What is the traditional distinction between humanitarian relief and development?

The traditional distinction between humanitarian relief and development has revolved around three main elements: time frame, purpose and mode of action.

Development is traditionally conceived as a strategically planned activity driven by governments to reduce poverty and create prosperity, social cohesion and a good quality of life for their citizens. It is a whole-of-society and whole-of-country endeavour with a long-term horizon, though it can also include small-scale and shorter-term measures. There is a diversity of development models in which the State plays different roles, but broadly speaking, development naturally

- 1 UNGA Res. 70/1, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015.
- 2 *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility: Report of UN Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit*, UN Doc. A/70/709, 2 February 2016, Annex, "Agenda for Humanity".
- 3 UNGA Res. 70/262, "Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture", UN Doc. A/RES/70/262, 27 April 2016; UNSC Res. 2282, UN Doc.S/RES/2282 (2016), 27 April 2016.
- 4 See, for instance, Organization for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*, OECD/LEGAL/5019, 2020; World Bank Group. *Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020–2025*, Washington, DC, 2020.
- 5 The Grand Bargain launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul has sought to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action along these lines. This agreement initially gathered a group of thirty-five donors and humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. As of 2020, it has over sixty signatories. See *The Grand Bargain: A Shared Commitment to Better Service People in Need*, Istanbul, 23 May 2016.
- 6 UNGA Res. 72/279, "Repositioning of the United Nations Development System in the Context of the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System", UN Doc. A/RES/72/279, 31 May 2018.

and legitimately rests on strong government ownership. It generally involves an investment in strengthening State institutions, particularly their regulatory, revenue generation and public service provision functions, and an investment in strengthening a form of social contract between the State and the population. It also encourages investment in people and empowering them to use their human capital to sustain themselves and contribute to individual and national welfare.

In contrast, humanitarian relief is traditionally conceived as an exceptional, temporary emergency measure to save lives and alleviate the suffering of people in armed conflict, disasters and other crises. As an exceptional emergency response, humanitarian relief can involve the direct delivery of assistance, with humanitarian workers substituting the authorities when the needs are acute and where the authorities are unable or unwilling to assist the population.⁷ It should be noted that this traditional conception of humanitarian action emphasizes the “relief” component, which is more immediately visible and tangible in a crisis. But humanitarian action also includes a protection component which involves a more continuous and long-term engagement with duty bearers (and institutions) who have a responsibility to preserve the safety, physical integrity and dignity of those affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.⁸

A hallmark of humanitarian relief is that it should respond to needs in an impartial manner. In armed conflict, addressing needs impartially means understanding but striving to stay outside of political, ethnic, religious and military fault lines. Often, this requires an approach based on neutrality and independence from the government and other parties to the conflict. For this reason, the planning, design, delivery and funding of humanitarian operations have been kept administratively distinct from those of development.

Historically, the structural and administrative separation by donors between humanitarian and development planning, programming, funding and coordination frameworks has been viewed as a key enabler for a principled response in politically and militarily fragmented contexts.

What efforts have there been to bridge the “humanitarian-development divide” in recent years?

Conceptions of how humanitarian relief and development should link up have evolved over time; they are part of a decades-old discussion in the aid sector.⁹ Initially, the link was conceived in a linear manner – a *continuum* – as a transition from short-term emergency relief activities conducted by humanitarian actors to

7 ICRC, “ICRC Assistance Policy”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86, No. 855, 2004.

8 ICRC, “ICRC Protection Policy”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 90, No. 871, 2008.

9 For an overview of the different stages of the policy reflection on the link between relief and development, see Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer (eds), *Beyond the Continuum: The Changing Role of Aid Policy in Protracted Crises*, Humanitarian Practice Group (HPG) Report No. 18, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, July 2004; Irina Mosel and Simon Levine, *Remaking the Case for Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development*, HPG Report, ODI, London, March 2014; Hugo Slim, “Joining What Belongs Together? The Triple Nexus and the Struggle for Policy Synthesis”, *Rural 21*, Vol. 53, 2019, pp. 6–10.

longer-term development carried out by the State. Operationally, the keywords were “handover” and “coordination”.

The linear relationship between humanitarian relief and development was challenged in the 1990s as being ill-adapted to the reality of protracted conflicts and to cyclical disasters. Policy thinking then evolved to a *contiguuum* model which conceives humanitarian relief and development as actions that may take place—and be financed—simultaneously in a given context.¹⁰ The notion of resilience played an important role in the operationalization of this *contiguuum* model—though a contested one. Operationally, the keywords of the *contiguuum* paradigm are “collaboration” (among humanitarian and development actors and with local actors) and “coherence” (between relief and development action).

The current discussion about the “humanitarian–development–peace nexus” is in many ways another iteration of the *contiguuum* paradigm. The relative novelty of the nexus is the fact that it is part of a global multilateral agenda—namely, the commitment by States and a range of partners, including international financial institutions and civil society, to deliver on the SDGs. This is unlike previous iterations of the link between relief and development, which were articulated separately by a few donors. The other relative novelty is the addition of “peace” to the humanitarian–development equation, but we will come to that later.

Efforts to conceptualize and operationalize the link between relief and development have pushed the various actors to critically assess the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of their work and take measures to improve it. But these efforts have also faced operational, financial and mindset challenges that are still visible today—for instance, the difficulty faced by some humanitarian responders in committing to longer-term support to populations while maintaining their technical, operational and financial capacity to respond to sudden-onset emergencies; or the continuing low risk tolerance of development actors and donors, which prevents them from fully engaging in conflict-affected environments; or differences in the *modus operandi* and principles guiding humanitarian relief and development, which can create challenges for collaboration, especially in environments that are highly polarized and fragmented politically and militarily. The fact that the discussion on the link between relief and development has been a constant feature of aid policy over decades reflects these persistent challenges.

You mentioned that resilience is a contested notion when it comes to the humanitarian response in conflict environments. What are the main arguments and what is the ICRC’s position on this issue?

In the humanitarian assistance sphere, the notion of resilience is traditionally linked to natural disaster situations, but it started being used in connection to conflict because of the chronic challenges posed by protracted conflicts. Resilience-oriented approaches are focused on helping affected people and communities to

10 An illustration of this evolution is the two European Commission communications on “Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development” issued in 1996 and 2001 (COM (96) 153 Final, 30 April 1996; COM (2001) 153 Final, 23 April 2001).

address their own needs and supporting existing structures and coping strategies. Resilience-oriented approaches involve a shift in the position of affected people, from (passive) *beneficiaries* of aid to *agents* of their own change. It also marks a shift in relational dynamics between affected people and humanitarian organizations. Resilience is an important concept in the policies of many donors, as an avenue to ensuring aid effectiveness, aid efficiency and aid coherence.¹¹

The question of resilience and conflict has raised concerns among some in the humanitarian sphere.¹² The first concern is that resilience approaches *de facto* transfer the onus of recovery to communities and overshadow the responsibility of those who are creating the needs and challenges in the first place. The second concern is operational – that the focus on resilience might shift financial resources away from the emergency response and that humanitarians may not be well equipped to read the financial and commercial power dynamics of war economies in order to ensure that their resilience-oriented interventions are well designed. The third concern is that the deep work on systems which resilience-oriented approaches imply may jeopardize humanitarian principles. Some of these concerns are the same ones as those raised in relation to the current discussion on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.

Approaches towards resilience among humanitarian organizations have created a spectrum of positions – and even identities – ranging from a stronger focus on emergencies to a stronger focus on resilience.¹³ This is one of the factors that creates diversity within the humanitarian ecosystem.¹⁴

Overall, the ICRC is positioned in the middle of that spectrum. Wherever needed, emergency life-saving relief is the top priority, even if it includes short-term measures. Alongside this, the ICRC also sees resilience-strengthening approaches as a positive policy and operational adjustment to the reality of protracted conflict. Strategies and practical measures that seek to decrease the vulnerability of populations and their exposure to threats in protracted conflicts are in line with international humanitarian law’s [IHL] focus on reducing the impact of conflict on civilians.

Importantly, however, reducing risks and vulnerabilities is an effort that concerns duty bearers, not only humanitarian actors. For the ICRC, resilience-strengthening approaches are not a substitute for work centred on promoting respect for the law among duty bearers. In fact, a number of resilience-oriented

11 For an overview of the notion of resilience from a donor perspective, see Department for International Development, *Topic Guide: What Is Resilience?*, London, May 2016.

12 See, in particular, Simon Levine, Adam Pain, Sarah Bailey and Lilianne Fan, *The Relevance of ‘Resilience’?*, HPG Policy Brief No. 49, ODI, London, September 2012; Jonathan Whittall, Mit Philips and Michiel Hofman, “Building Resilience by Deconstructing Humanitarian Aid”, *Médecins Sans Frontières Blog*, 6 February 2014. For an overview of the resilience debate, see Jérémie Labbé, “Humanitarian Aid vs Resilience Debate Should Put Priorities in Context”, *International Peace Institute Blog*, 28 March 2014.

13 Dorothea Hilhorst, “Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of the Two Brands of Humanitarian Action”, *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, Vol. 3, 2018.

14 The Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre in Geneva (HERE-Geneva) conducted a research project on the question of mandates between 2018 and 2020 which highlights this diversity clearly. See Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, *Unpacking Humanitarianism*, HERE-Geneva, April 2020.

activities conducted by the ICRC are specifically designed with a combination of protection and assistance measures. Two examples are the Health Care in Danger project and its links to the ICRC's broader health activities, and the ICRC's work on urban essential services, which combines technical collaboration with utilities to keep systems afloat and an engagement (protection and legal dialogue) with parties to the conflict around the conduct of hostilities and the protection of civilians and civilian objects.¹⁵

Secondly, the ICRC does not promote people's resilience *to* violence and conflict, but people's resilience *within* a context of violence and conflict. For example, a resilience approach would not seek to prevent displacement in situations where vulnerability and threats are such that people need to leave, but rather would support them to become resilient in their new situation as displaced people.

In short, resilience-strengthening approaches are an important element in the ICRC's work with communities facing chronic and long-term needs and challenges, and they rest on a combination of assistance and protection work. Ultimately, the space for resilience in conflict areas is shaped by the actions of arms bearers and parties to the conflict, by the level of pressure they put on essential services and people's coping mechanisms, and by the level of threat they pose to people's safety and well-being.

How relevant is the relief–development distinction in protracted conflicts?

Protracted conflicts have challenged some aspects of the traditional distinction between relief and development. Time frame is a case in point. In long wars or “no war, no peace” situations, humanitarian actors often carry out activities which also go beyond short-term emergency relief.¹⁶

Looking at the ICRC's assistance operations, for instance, alongside emergency life-saving relief, we see activities that can challenge traditional conceptions of what is “humanitarian” and what is “development”. For instance, the ICRC supports micro-economic initiatives that help displaced people, returnees and other victims of the conflict generate income or diversify their livelihoods; we strengthen local agricultural and veterinarian capacity to safeguard animal health and improve agricultural yields. As mentioned already, we also work with municipalities and utilities to reduce public health risks by keeping urban water and sanitation systems afloat; and we support primary, secondary and tertiary health structures and local health workforces not only in emergency or trauma care, but also in longer-term health-care needs such as mental health,

15 For an articulation of the link between assistance, protection and legal work on urban services, see ICRC, *Urban Services in Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People*, Geneva, 2014.

16 HERE-Geneva highlights this operational adaptation in a striking way in its case studies on Mali and the Central African Republic, having compared the stated goals of various organizations that began work in those countries during a crisis and stayed on afterwards. See Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, *The Limits of Labels: HERE “Mandates Study” Mali Report*, HERE-Geneva, 2018, Annex 1; Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, *From Macro to Micro: HERE “Mandates” Study Central African Republic Report*, HERE-Geneva, 2019, Annex 3.

physical rehabilitation of the war wounded and persons with disabilities, and non-communicable diseases.

This is not a mandate shift, but an operational adaptation to needs which evolve over time and for which a response based on an emergency mindset can quickly become irrelevant, onerous and even counterproductive by creating dependency.¹⁷ The humanitarian rationale behind these types of activities is to help affected populations meet recurrent or chronic needs in a more effective and autonomous manner, and to make future shocks less severe or at least more manageable. These types of activities can also help to preserve “development holds” by strengthening existing structures and service capacity. Importantly, the work of the ICRC in relation to longer-term needs and challenges is based on its added value, as a humanitarian actor, in terms of access, proximity to communities, linkages with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [National Societies], and a granular knowledge of the impact of the fighting on people’s daily lives and on services and systems. In some places, this longer-term work can also be based on a residual responsibility towards populations with which the ICRC has engaged during more intense phases of a conflict, and which would otherwise not receive adequate support.¹⁸

Other aspects of the traditional distinction between humanitarian action and development may remain highly relevant, even in protracted conflicts.

The distinction between humanitarian and development planning, programming, coordination and funding frameworks, while largely administrative, was devised for a good reason. It provides humanitarian actors with the *possibility* of assessing, drawing attention to or responding to needs impartially, in environments where the State may have a bias or a limited presence or acceptance over parts of the territory. This is not to say that humanitarian programmes can never align with or even leverage development plans and investments driven by the State. It simply means that there needs to be an alternative avenue for independent programming in order to avoid blind spots and “leaving people behind” in fragmented and polarized environments such as armed conflict.

Another reason why this administrative distinction between humanitarian and development frameworks is necessary is that the State is not the only duty bearer that a humanitarian organization may need to interact with. All parties to the conflict – State and non-State – have obligations towards the population under their control. In conflict-affected places, it is important that planning, programming and funding frameworks and tools enable humanitarian actors to engage with non-State armed groups within the framework of IHL.¹⁹

17 In 2015, the ICRC removed the term “emergency” from its annual appeal to better reflect this dual operational time frame. See ICRC, *Protracted Conflict and Humanitarian Action: Some Recent ICRC Experiences*, Geneva, 2016, p. 4. In 2002, the ICRC developed internal guidance on its role and operational adaptation in “periods of transition”. See Marion Harroff-Tavel, “Do Wars Ever End? The Work of the International Committee of the Red Cross When the Guns Fall Silent”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 851, 2003.

18 M. Harroff-Tavel, above note 17.

19 UN Security Council Resolution 2462 on counterterrorism acknowledges this issue. It recognizes the need to ensure that its provisions are implemented in a manner consistent with IHL and urges States to take

Some commentators have brought up real or perceived threats to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. How can a “nexus approach” be compatible with humanitarian principles?

In all their iterations, efforts to operationalize the humanitarian–development–peace nexus by donors or operational agencies have largely focused on overcoming the *bureaucratic divide* between humanitarian and development planning, programming, funding and coordination frameworks and processes.

The risk that some humanitarians see, including the ICRC, is threefold. First is the risk of a “protection gap”. If planning, programming and funding become largely contingent to or subsumed under processes led by the State—a party to the conflict—there is a risk that priority will be given to areas and issues which are politically consensual for the government and its donors. The consequence, in some contexts, is potentially failing to address or even discuss needs and problems arising in areas outside the control of the State or needs and problems caused by the actions of the State. A related concern is that vulnerable individuals from groups who feel stigmatized, who fear persecution or who do not trust the authorities may choose not to seek support if that support is provided only by or through the State. Experience shows that ensuring independent avenues for support is a way to mitigate the risk that some people will deliberately forego the support they need for self-protection reasons.

Secondly, there is the risk of an “emergency gap”. Here the concern is that the prioritization of development considerations may drive resources towards long-term outcomes at the expense of urgent needs which humanitarian actors already struggle to address, or may shift the emergency response entirely to the State without the State necessarily having the requisite surge capacity to address an emergency in a timely manner.²⁰

Thirdly, there is the perception risk. Humanitarians need to have the possibility of distancing themselves from initiatives led by actors who may be perceived by communities and arms bearers as associated with a particular side of the conflict. They also need to maintain their ability to engage with communities and parties to the conflict from all sides. This is key for access, for the security of staff and for an impartial response. Pressure to operate with and alongside the government or national or international security forces (or non-State armed groups, for that matter), for instance, can easily affect the way humanitarian action is perceived locally, either presently or in the future, seeing that conflict dynamics evolve over time. A review of the ICRC’s post-9/11 approach in Afghanistan illustrates the importance of managing this perception risk.²¹

into account the effect of counterterrorism measures on “exclusively humanitarian activities” carried out by “impartial humanitarian actors”. UNSC Res. 2462, UN Doc. S/RES/2462 (2019), March 2019.

20 See, for instance, Monica de Castellarnau and Velina Stoianova, *Emergency Gap: Humanitarian Action Critically Wounded*, Emergency Gap Series No. 1, Médecins Sans Frontières, April 2016; Marc DuBois, *The Cost of Coherence*, Emergency Gap Series No. 4, Médecins Sans Frontières, December 2016.

21 For a detailed analysis of this case, see Fiona Terry, “The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 881, 2011.

The underlying logic behind some humanitarians’ concern with “nexus approaches” focused on overcoming the *bureaucratic divide* is that the *administrative distinction* between humanitarian and development planning, programming, funding and coordination frameworks and tools is precisely one of the key enablers through which humanitarian principles have been operationalized, especially in contexts where the State is a party to the conflict.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that humanitarian and development (or peace) actors can interact on the substance (analysis, exchange of expertise) and collaborate operationally where appropriate (and this may imply a mindset change), but maintain those distinct administrative measures which are necessary *to ensure that affected people are supported safely and in an impartial manner, in highly polarized and fragmented contexts.*

Looking at the ICRC’s experience, the following seven points can be distilled as a basic checklist for a principled operational engagement with actors and donors situated outside the traditional humanitarian sphere:

1. Do **coordination and planning processes**, and in particular the role of the State and other political actors in these processes, allow for the humanitarian actor to assess and respond to needs impartially?
2. Is appropriate **financing**, notably for longer-term resilience-strengthening activities in conflict-affected areas, **accessible to the humanitarian actor directly** and not only through the government, in situations where humanitarians’ role in such activities is critical?
3. Are funding lines **unearmarked or earmarked** in such a way that they do not limit humanitarian operations to a particular community or area in the country or that they match needs that have been previously independently and impartially identified?
4. Do **reporting requirements** allow the humanitarian actor to outline the impact of its response while safeguarding data protection principles and without exposing the identity or the ethnic, political or religious make-up of their beneficiaries?
5. Do **due diligence** requirements, including those relating to counterterrorism, allow the humanitarian actor to work with all individuals and communities in need without discrimination?
6. Is the humanitarian actor *exempted from* **measuring the outcomes or impact** of its action against **political indicators** (e.g., national security, migration control, national peace priorities, adherence to peace processes)?
7. Are the **communication and visibility policies** of donors or partners sufficiently flexible to enable a humanitarian actor to manage the way it is perceived by local communities and arms carriers?

What this basic checklist shows is the importance of unpacking what humanitarian principles mean in concrete terms. This allows all actors involved to identify which aspects of the coordination, planning, programming and funding frameworks may need to be adjusted to make a collaboration between different “nexus actors” compatible with humanitarian principles, so that ultimately protection and assistance

“blind spots” are avoided and so that affected people are supported impartially – or, in development terms, inclusively – in polarized and fragmented settings.

Mentions of humanitarian principles are omnipresent in policy documents relating to the humanitarian–development–peace nexus,²² but these references are usually end-of-sentence caveats and are rarely developed further (“while fully respecting humanitarian principles”). This perpetuates the idea that humanitarian principles are a constraint to the nexus. Yet, what humanitarian principles aim to enable – access, trust, impartial response, management of security risks – is equally valuable for development or peace actors because it helps to ensure that “no one is left behind” in fragmented and polarized contexts. In this sense, humanitarian principles are a strength for the nexus, especially if humanitarian actors are at the same time equipped to better support affected people dealing with long-term needs and challenges in their own programmes.

What is the ICRC’s view on the concept of a humanitarian–development–peace nexus?

The ICRC sees the triple nexus as an ecosystem of actors of influence, resources and expertise – beyond the humanitarian sphere – that can help us build *sustainable humanitarian impact* with affected populations. In other words, the important part of the nexus for the ICRC is the *actors* behind “development” and “peace”. They are key for the sustainability of humanitarian protection and assistance efforts.

Behind “development”, we see primarily State authorities at the central and subnational levels and the donors and investors working with them, many of which are increasingly focusing on crisis preparedness and prevention. Their choices and actions can drastically and durably reduce humanitarian needs and mitigate the effects of crises on people’s lives, potentially at large scale. Behind “development” we also see the more informal community-based governance structures which equally play a leading role in the planning and implementation of development efforts at the local level.

Behind “peace”, we see primarily those involved in war: political decision-makers, State and non-State arms bearers and those who support them. Their decisions and actions, particularly in the conduct of hostilities, can determine the extent of destruction, suffering and grievances that people and countries sustain during conflict and that they will need to address in the future. In other words, respect for IHL needs to be part of the “nexus equation”. Behind “peace” we also see governmental and non-governmental actors involved in mediating and settling conflicts and in promoting measures to defuse the drivers of violence and conflict at local level. These actors can help to create breakthroughs on key humanitarian problems and can help to foster restraint in the behaviour of arms bearers.

A nexus that works is a situation where people affected by conflict can safely rebuild their lives with agency and dignity, and where there are no blind

22 See, for instance, OECD, above note 5.

spots – no vulnerable people ignored or excluded. This means that sometimes the nexus will need to give preference to humanitarian action, particularly in contexts where reaching people requires an impartial and independent approach.²³

This also means that the nexus should not only be about humanitarian, development and peace actors *working together*, it should also be about enabling each actor to be good and even better at what they do, separately. The exchange of knowledge, expertise and analysis plays a key role in this regard.

For instance, in 2018, the World Bank, the ICRC, UNICEF and the Centre for Mediterranean Integration launched a collaborative process of learning and knowledge exchange across the Middle East and North Africa region with and in support of urban water and sanitation utilities. The perspectives and expertise of the World Bank helped the ICRC improve its understanding of the institutional, legal and financial factors shaping the performance of utilities, as well as of ways to reduce non-revenue water and integrated water resource management – all of which help the ICRC build sustainability in its work with utilities before and during emergencies. Conversely, the ICRC’s experience supporting water and sanitation utilities during conflict in the region brought useful perspectives to the World Bank and other partners involved in this initiative on how systems break down during conflict and on ways to ensure continuity in service delivery with the humanitarian objective of safeguarding public health.

You’ve just referred to sustainable humanitarian impact. This is a term that the ICRC uses in its institutional strategy. Can you unpack what this means?

The ICRC’s Institutional Strategy 2019–2022 indeed coins the term “sustainable humanitarian impact” as the second of its five strategic orientations for this period. It forms the backbone of the strategy, together with the first strategic orientation around “influencing behaviour to prevent violations of IHL and alleviate suffering”, and it is closely connected to another orientation focused on “working with others”.²⁴ The institutional steer towards “building sustainable humanitarian impact with people affected” is about maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the ICRC’s action in relation to people’s needs *as they evolve over time*, particularly in protracted conflicts and chronic situations of violence, bearing in mind that such needs emerge from compounded challenges of conflict, violence, governance, poverty, and environment and climate vulnerabilities, which may lie well beyond the scope and capacity of the ICRC and of the humanitarian ecosystem more broadly.

Unpacking the notion of “sustainable humanitarian impact” conceptually helps to shed further light on the rationale behind the ICRC’s view on the nexus discussion, and on some key operational implications of trying to support people facing long-term and chronic needs:

23 See Hugo Slim, “Nexus Thinking in Humanitarian Policy: How Does Everything Fit Together on the Ground?”, Keynote Address to the World Food Program Annual Partnership Consultations, Rome, 25 October 2017.

24 ICRC, *Institutional Strategy 2019–2022*, Geneva, 2019.

- *(Sustainable) Humanitarian (impact)* refers not only to life-saving but also to life-sustaining action that supports people's ability to live and (re)build their lives with autonomy, agency and dignity. It is also about putting people rather than the institution at the centre of the response, which means being accountable to affected people, addressing needs impartially, and understanding protection and assistance needs and risks in all their complexity *as people experience them*, even if these do not strictly fit our area of expertise. The importance of working with others comes into sharp focus in relation to this last point.
- ***Sustainable (humanitarian) impact*** is a situation where long-term or chronic needs and protection-related risks arising from armed conflict and chronic violence are durably reduced or prevented. Importantly, this should be done by supporting the resilience of affected people and the essential services and systems they rely on, but also through the actions of duty bearers. Indeed, the ICRC speaks of sustainable *impact*, not of sustainable *action*, and this semantic distinction is important: firstly, because emergency life-saving relief remains a top priority where needed, no matter how many times it may be required – that is the principle of humanity; and secondly, because *impact* is not achievable through humanitarian action alone – it requires and relies on decisions and choices made by authorities and by political, diplomatic and military stakeholders, as well as by development donors with the power and responsibility to bring about development and peace. It is for this reason that, for the ICRC, the “triple nexus” is a pool of interlocutors, resources, expertise and actors of influence which are critical for the sustainability of humanitarian gains, more than a triple set of objectives that the ICRC would set *itself* up to achieve.

In this sense, the steer towards *sustainable impact* is an expectation of *effort* institutionally. The ICRC alone cannot *ensure* impact, but what it can do is help to *build* impact by strengthening outcome-based anticipatory and preventive approaches across its operations so that long-term and chronic needs and risks are reduced, mitigated or made more manageable when a crisis hits.

Operationalizing sustainable humanitarian impact is not without challenges in fluid contexts which often require emergency response surges. It has implications in terms of mindset, planning and programming tools and methods, operational approaches (especially partnerships) and financing models. These are some of the areas where work is being done internally at the ICRC to support the implementation of the Institutional Strategy.

Another major area of focus in efforts to build sustainable humanitarian impact is strengthening cooperation with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Collectively, the Movement combines speed and flexibility, access, proximity and sustained presence, complementary mandates and a distinct institutional relationship with States and other duty bearers, which are key to supporting affected people in a relevant and effective manner over time. Harnessing this potential includes a stronger investment in strengthening the organizational and response capacity of National Societies in humanitarian

contexts. The National Society Investment Alliance, a pooled fund managed jointly by the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, is a good example of this effort to support National Societies’ capacity to deliver on their mission in a sustainable manner.

What are the challenges for the international community in grappling with the definition of “peace”? In your view, are concrete definitions necessary for the success of the triple nexus?

For many humanitarian actors, the idea that they should contribute to broader peace efforts is not straightforward, even though peace is something that humanitarian actors, like affected populations, want to see happen. There are not one but many visions of what the future of a country at war should look like, and efforts towards peace involve political, military and socio-economic choices and trade-offs. Aligning or being perceived to align with such choices can be a dangerous line for humanitarian actors, who rely on being accepted by all sides of the conflict to access affected communities impartially, and for their own security.

And so, it does not help that “peace” is a grey area of nexus policy and practice. In nexus discussions, “peace” has been interpreted by governments, donors, the UN and NGOs to mean peacebuilding, peacekeeping, peace processes, diplomacy, conflict prevention, stabilization, security and so on. The difficulty is that these various approaches to peace involve actors with entirely different profiles, responsibilities and modes of action.

Because discussions on the nexus put so much emphasis on collaboration among different actors, it is important to be clear on (a) which stakeholders have the primary responsibility for achieving and sustaining peace, (b) what actions and outcomes are necessary to achieve and sustain peace, (c) which stakeholders are directly involved in those actions for the *specific* purpose of achieving peace, and (d) which stakeholders are involved in those actions but for other purposes than achieving peace. A common understanding of these four elements would help the various actors to be clear on what type of collaboration is possible, and where a stricter distinction must be maintained between humanitarian and peace actors.

In terms of areas of distinction, there is the well-known issue around the delivery of humanitarian relief by armed forces or groups. This is a frequently cited example of where the blurring of lines between humanitarian and peace- or security-related objectives has an adverse effect on humanitarian efforts conducted in parallel by actors who strive to operate on the basis of neutrality and independence.

Another area where the distinction between humanitarian and peace actors needs to be managed carefully is negotiations with and between parties for humanitarian access which sometimes happen in parallel to broader “political tracks”. Here, ensuring clarity of purpose and a clear distinction between the two types of discussion is essential to avoid jeopardizing the humanitarian outcome sought. While sometimes humanitarian discussions advance better than political ones, blurring the lines between the two can invert the dynamic and make

humanitarian outcomes contingent on the progress of the political discussion. Decisions on the timing and location of the discussion, and on the profile of the stakeholders involved, are important concrete measures for creating a “firewall” against such risks.

In terms of areas of convergence, one basic but fundamental area is the principle of “do no harm”.²⁵ Humanitarian actors have an ethical responsibility to avoid that their actions inadvertently fuel tensions or create additional risks for affected people, and to seek ways to reduce grievances and ease tensions between communities. The principle of “do no harm” has been an important professional standard for humanitarian protection work for decades, but it requires that humanitarians invest in their capacity to analyze the drivers and dynamics of conflict and violence at all levels. An exchange of knowledge and analysis between humanitarian actors and actors in the peacebuilding community who have an expertise in political and conflict analysis is an important form of collaboration for operationalizing the “do no harm” principle and enhancing synergy between humanitarian action and peace efforts.

Another area where humanitarian action and peace efforts interface is respect for IHL and the protection of civilians more precisely. This is an area of frequent dialogue between humanitarian actors and arms bearers, including those deployed in the context of stabilization missions, counter-insurgency operations and peacekeeping missions.²⁶ Ultimately, if in an armed conflict, civilians and civilian objects are spared and humanitarian action is enabled and supported solely for its impartial humanitarian purpose, then IHL and humanitarian action can foster conditions for peace. They can have a stabilizing effect on people’s lives, mitigate the degradation of services and systems, and reduce the risk of grievances forming. In the face of rampant violations of IHL and a restricted space for humanitarian action, however, humanitarian actors can still play an important role in the difficult path towards peace by shedding light on the human cost of the conflict and on the grievances that are forming, and by calling on duty bearers—and on those with influence over them (diplomatically, militarily, economically)—for action.²⁷

Looking at ICRC practice, can you give any examples of good synergies between humanitarian action and longer-term outcomes linked to development and peace?

The first examples that come to mind are some of the ICRC assistance activities mentioned earlier. These are interesting not only because they are implemented

25 Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1999; ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work*, Geneva, 2018.

26 For a discussion on the areas of convergence and divergence between humanitarian protection and protection of civilians, see Victoria Metcalfe, *Protecting Civilians? The Interaction between International Military and Humanitarian Actors*, HPG Working Paper, ODI, London, August 2012.

27 The OECD’s *DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus* acknowledges the importance of diplomatic influence when it calls on Development Assistance Committee members to leverage political influence to support, *inter alia*, “humanitarian access and outcomes”. OECD, above note 5, Section III.3b.

over several years, but also because they involve sustained operational and technical partnerships with National Societies and other local actors such as municipalities, utilities, health staff and line ministries. Some of these activities are also funded by development donors, based on contractual arrangements that enable a compatibility with humanitarian principles along some of the seven points outlined earlier. For instance, in South Sudan the ICRC is strengthening its support to primary and secondary health structures, including mental health and psychosocial support, as part of a partnership with the World Bank. The project focuses on areas that are affected by conflict and are hard to reach for others. From a humanitarian perspective, the collaboration allows the ICRC to enhance health services and referral systems at the community and subnational levels. It is also further improving the ICRC’s knowledge of health systems. From a development perspective, the collaboration helps to cover a development “blind spot” and improve the overall geographical coverage of essential health services in the country.

Alongside assistance activities, the ICRC’s work to enhance the protection of people affected by conflict and violence and to prevent violations of IHL is an equally strong example of long-term action which complements broader efforts by others to foster development and peace.

One can think, for instance, of the ICRC’s work on missing persons. The question of missing persons requires cooperation between parties to the conflict and between parties and families. It is often an issue on the agenda of political talks facilitated by States or the UN, as is the case for Syria. It can be one of the last remaining items on the agenda decades after conflicts end, as is the case between Iraq and Kuwait, in Sri Lanka, in Peru, in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and until recently between Argentina and the United Kingdom. The ICRC plays an important role in the prevention of cases of missing persons, including in places of detention, as well as in efforts to search for missing persons and to support their families. For instance, the ICRC chairs five multilateral coordination mechanisms on missing persons, serving as a neutral actor between parties. It also provides legal and technical advice to parties and to authorities, and supports families throughout the process, including by helping them to regain a place in society and to overcome social stigmatization or isolation and economic, legal and administrative challenges.

More broadly, we can also think of the continuous engagement with lawmakers, governments and defence, judicial, penitentiary and law enforcement authorities through advisory services, trainings and humanitarian diplomacy, and the similar engagement with non-State armed groups in armed conflict settings, based on our mandate under the Geneva Conventions. While the primary purpose of this work is not to prevent armed conflict and violence, it can play an important role in reducing some of the long-term consequences of armed conflict and violence on infrastructure, on essential services, on people’s lives and future prospects, and on the trust they place on State institutions. Along similar lines, the ICRC’s role as a neutral intermediary to help parties implement IHL obligations or humanitarian measures requiring cooperation can also foster a

level of trust between parties. All of these are relevant factors for both development and peace.

A concrete example which combines assistance, protection and prevention approaches is the case of our work on water in Ukraine, particularly in 2017–18. This example is emblematic because it involves a humanitarian actor (the ICRC), a development stakeholder (in this case, the authorities) and peace stakeholders (the Minsk Group), and leverages their respective roles, responsibilities and comparative advantages.

In the east of Ukraine, water systems span both sides of the line of contact between government- and non-government-held areas. The infrastructure serves hundreds of thousands of people and when there was fighting, it was exposed to the risk of shelling. To prevent the disruption of water supply and public health risks, the ICRC worked with municipalities to identify and map critical infrastructural nodes and to strengthen redundancies and build back-up systems around these nodes, so that the systems could remain functional even if some parts were hit.

In parallel, the ICRC developed an IHL-based dialogue with parties to the conflict on the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including the critical water infrastructure nodes that had been mapped. This engagement included the mobilization of stakeholders involved in the Trilateral Contact Group, or Minsk Group – a multilateral diplomatic process aimed at finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Ukraine, and which looked at essential services as part of a broader agenda item on social and economic issues.

These initiatives required a sustained dialogue with all stakeholders, and they were not fail-proof. But they helped to ensure the continuity of an essential service of critical humanitarian importance, they helped to preserve large-scale infrastructure and to prevent a development reversal, and they helped to ground issues discussed by the Minsk Group on tangible measures requiring cooperation among the parties to the conflict and the various actors of influence.

The bottom line is that synergies between humanitarian action and longer-term outcomes linked to development and peace do not result solely from programmatic partnerships with development or peace actors. Synergies can also come from humanitarian action itself, especially where forward-looking preventive approaches are adopted, and where efforts to convene, mobilize and influence others are given due strategic operational value.