# Straddling humanitarian, peace, and development boundaries: Unarmed Civilian Protection and the triple nexus

## Introduction

**Violent conflicts – and the protection risks and needs of civilian populations – emerge and exist within complex, interlinked systems. Poverty, state fragility, forced displacement, climate change – these are examples of systemic forces that shape and are deeply interlinked with violent conflict and humanitarian needs. The concept of the triple nexus – a term used to capture the interlinkages between humanitarian, peace, and development work – refers to efforts to recognise these interrelationships and integrate responses across these often-siloed sectors. Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) is a natural fit with a triple nexus approach, linking direct responses to imminent violence with long-term systemic change.**

To understand and to address the protection risks and needs of civilians, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors need to think holistically. Combining humanitarian and peacebuilding approaches, UCP integrates direct action to prevent and respond to violence with longer-term peacebuilding strategies, working to address both immediate needs and longer-term development and peace outcomes.

## UCP and the triple nexus in action

What this looks like in practice depends on the conflict context and the needs and leadership of civilians themselves. For example:

- In Ukraine, NP teams both directly protect civilians on the frontlines of war through protective accompaniment and supporting urgent evacuations, while at the same time working in deep partnership with local organisations to support the longer-



*NP staff with civilians at food/water distribution. Mykolaiv, Ukraine, July 2022. © Joachim Kleinmann/NP*

term sustainability of their response. In the midst of armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies, it can be easy to lose sight of these longer-term goals – but UCP, and the triple nexus, serve as reminders that urgent actions must be grounded in principles that acknowledge the long-term implications of different actions.

- In South Sudan, NP works with local Women's Protection Teams and Youth Protection Teams to directly respond to immediate threats of sexual and gender-based violence, while at the same time strengthening these teams as sustainable, community-based organisations that work on issues such as peacebuilding, livelihoods, and education. Many of these teams run their own activities, including training other members of the community in protection actions and peacebuilding, meeting with authorities and other stakeholders to advocate for community needs, and creating their own mutual aid and livelihood strategies to continue their work.

- In the Philippines, NP works both as an implementing organization of the ongoing peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government, while at the same time continuing to de-escalate and interrupt immediate threats of violence. In doing so, the NP teams bring a direct protection lens to the longer-term peacebuilding and development goals of the peace agreement, ensuring that protection principles are respected and integrated as part of its implementation.

- In Darfur, humanitarian actors have primarily focused on groups, such as internally displaced farmers, and failed to significantly engage with nomadic communities – mainly out of perceived security threats. Some nomads have been reporting to NP that they have not seen an NGO in years or at all, but notice the support to IDP farmers. This is resulting in a feeling of abandonment and resentment which in such a volatile setting can be very harmful. UCP teams have acknowledged this imbalance and sought to address it from the beginning of their engagement, bringing together conflict sensitivity and social cohesion peacebuilding principles with development and humanitarian efforts.

## UCP and the triple nexus: Key principles for implementation

There are a number of key principles that connect and reinforce UCP and the triple nexus as mutually reinforcing frameworks, and that can guide future integrated action and implementation. These principles can be read as a set of recommendations for policymakers, implementers, donors, communities, and other actors across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors:



*Annielyn, a Barangay Health Worker and peacebuilder. Basilan, Philippines, 2022. © Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP*

## 1)      Localising the triple nexus

While a lot of emphasis in the nexus discourse is put on collaboration and coordination among *external or international* agencies from different sectors to better assist local communities, the core emphasis in UCP is to put *communities* at the centre of responses – not merely as recipients, but as leaders and agents. It is those directly experiencing and accessing humanitarian and aid services that are often most aware of and most affected by the gaps in and disconnections between these systems. By recognising and situating local communities themselves as key leaders and stakeholders, particularly those most marginalised from decision-making such as women and youth, integration of triple nexus thinking is much more likely across sectors. For example, in South Sudan and Bangladesh, NP collaborated with women and youth to facilitate relief services. Subsequently, these groups began expanding their work across different sectors and taking a more critical and holistic approach to assess other aspects of relief operations, enhance safety, and promote participation, equal access, and accountability. International humanitarian and development stakeholders can also assist communities in accessing international coordination mechanisms, as well as draw international agencies into spaces where communities are already making essential contributions to relief, peace, and development.

## 2)      Mirroring existing community action and strategy

UCP takes existing, community response strategies as a starting point to understanding protection in order to guide program design and implementation. This opens the door for multi-dimensional programming and cross-sector collaboration, as civil society organisations (CSOs) in conflict-affected communities rarely operate within the designated siloes of humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and development. Many CSOs wear multiple hats: distributing food one day, resolving a conflict the next day. Our teams assist them in expanding their support networks across sectors within a given conflict stage and in reinventing themselves as the conflict evolves or regresses. For example, Ukrainian volunteers who are at the forefront of evacuating people from liberated cities in Ukraine are often simultaneously enacting peacebuilding and human rights defence in their everyday work. By operating across sectors, UCP animates the nexus, connecting local partners at the right time, to the right actors.

## 3)      Enhancing social cohesion in the midst of humanitarian emergencies

Material aid and development assistance shape local political economies, often exacerbating and influencing power disparities in communities experiencing strains of violent conflict, poverty, and other disruptions. UCP teams – who in general do not provide material aid, though they may work in coordination with actors who do – often play a role in facilitating dialogue between

*NP protection officers were conducting a patrol when a man approached them — as often occurs during patrolling activities — and shared an alarming story about a family quarrel among his relatives that had turned violent. NP Patrol in Ba'aj District, Iraq, May 2022. © NP*

communities and humanitarian and development actors, as well as addressing a multitude of protection risks that accompany the implementation of humanitarian aid and development projects. They also embed longer-term vision peacebuilding principles in emergency responses, ensuring that social cohesion and conflict sensitivity are integrated in implementation. In a similar fashion, UCP teams facilitate dialogue between humanitarian actors and human rights advocates, often operating in isolation and opposition to each other in response to atrocities. Putting the voices of affected communities at the centre of these conversations is a key means for breaking through sectoral silos.

### 4) Addressing gaps left by humanitarian and development silos through wide-parameter programming

UCP can and has addressed protection gaps that emerge due to narrow mandate restrictions and low security thresholds among other actors in humanitarian and development settings. This may entail engaging with armed actors or hardliners, addressing protection issues outside of designated refugee populations, or mitigating family violence and inter-communal conflicts that fall outside the scope of humanitarian operations, but are limiting or undermining existing responses. UCP can provide a comprehensive and integrated response to humanitarian emergencies that addresses the multiple factors that drive violence, displacement, and its consequences.  There are challenges to implementing such a cross-sector approach, with a competitive grants-based system often discouraging different organisations and agencies from working together across programmatic areas. There is a key role for donors to play here in advocating for collaborative action that draws on the specific expertise and skillsets of different actors, and that ultimately leads to stronger, mutually reinforcing programming.

### 5) Weaving together short- and long-term action through conflict cycles

Operating across humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors, UCP combines crisis interventions with long-term peacebuilding and allows actors flexibility to move with the inevitable ebb and flow of conflict cycles. UCP teams may provide direct protection in the midst of a crisis, then, in the aftermath, accelerate social cohesion by bringing groups together around the issue of security and build the leadership capacity of women or youth. If a new wave of violence occurs, UCP teams often have pre-existing relationships in place that enable moving effectively and sensitively back to crisis response, alongside communities themselves. Thus, UCP approaches use the tide of conflict cycles to accelerate impact rather than waiting around for the next crises to emerge or retreating prematurely. Relatedly, when international actors declare the stage of humanitarian emergency to be completed and donors pivot portfolios to peace and development, there can often be interruptions in support to communities. But it is often at the transition periods from one conflict stage to another where protection responses appear most urgent. UCP can act as a buffer and linkage during these transition phases, connecting action from one phase of engagement to the next – bringing a peacebuilding lens to emergency, a humanitarian protection lens to development.