

OPERATIONALISING THE HDP NEXUS IN FRAGILE STATES: INSIGHTS FROM MYANMAR'S NRM EXPERIENCE

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION



Myanmar earthquake response © CESVI, 2025

The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus represents one of the most ambitious shifts in how the international community addresses protracted crises and fragile contexts. Yet, translating this framework from policy commitment to practical reality remains profoundly challenging. In an era where fragility is deepening globally—driven by conflict, climate change, economic instability, and health crises—the need for genuine integration between humanitarian, development, and peace actors has never been more urgent.¹

The European Union has long championed this shift. Although the overlap between humanitarian aid, rehabilitation and development was recognised as early as the 1980s, the tools to turn that awareness into a truly integrated approach were still lacking, and interventions continued to follow an ineffective sequential logic.² With the formal adoption of the Humanitarian–Development Nexus in 2017³ and the addition of the peace dimension in 2018, the EU made the Triple Nexus a core pillar of its external action, grounded in principles of coherence, collaboration and complementarity.

Yet translating these principles into practice remains uneven. Significant obstacles persist, from fragmented funding streams and rigid institutional mandates to limited engagement of local actors and inconsistent political will.⁴

Therefore, while the HDP nexus is increasingly embedded in policy, its operationalisation in fragile states still faces significant structural challenges. Yet, in this context the example of Myanmar stands as a beacon of possibility, showing that in highly fragile environments when localisation and collaborative forms of governance are prioritised—and supported by well-coordinated, flexible donor mechanisms—the HDP nexus can be successfully made operational in practice.

This is particularly evident in the experience of CESVI, an Italian NGO active worldwide for more than forty years and operating in Myanmar for over two decades. During this time, CESVI has worked in some of the country's most fragile and hard-to-reach regions, building a deep understanding of local dynamics, community structures and informal governance systems.

1. <https://voiceeu.org/publications/voice-policy-resolution-2025.pdf>
2. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491435/EXPO-DEVE_SP\(2012\)491435_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491435/EXPO-DEVE_SP(2012)491435_EN.pdf)
3. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf>
4. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/eu-hdp-nexus-study-final-report-nov-2022_en.pdf

This long-term engagement has proven essential for navigating conflict-affected environments where formal state institutions are often limited in their reach or capacity. It has also enabled CESVI to cultivate trusted relationships with community leaders and civil society networks—actors who are not only essential operational partners but become strategic allies in fragile settings, especially when crises escalate and only local actors can ensure continuity on the ground.

This legacy proved decisive when, on 28 March 2025, a devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake tore through Sagaing, Mandalay and Southern Shan State. Entire neighbourhoods collapsed. At least 3,757 people lost their lives; over 200,000 were uprooted. In Nyaung Shwe Township—on the fragile shores of Inle Lake, Myanmar’s iconic UNESCO Biosphere Reserve—the quake struck a population already battered by conflict, displacement and economic decline since the 2021 military coup. Years of overlapping crises had hollowed out basic services and pushed local communities into a daily struggle for survival.

What CESVI witnessed on the ground in Nyaung Shwe reflects a broader shift in the way the international community understands crisis response. Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the launch of the “New Way of Working,” it has become clear that the old, compartmentalised system—where humanitarian relief is followed by development programming and, somewhere in the distance, by peacebuilding—no longer matches the realities of today’s fragile states. Conflicts last longer, disasters strike more often, governance systems weaken and needs overlap in ways that cannot be separated neatly into phases.

“The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus represents one of the most ambitious shifts in how the international community addresses protracted crises and fragile contexts.”



Myanmar earthquake response © CESVI, 2025


In such a landscape, emergency response was never going to be straightforward. Yet CESVI mobilised within hours—not only thanks to its logistical capacity, but because it could immediately rely on the network it had built over two decades with community volunteers, local leaders and civil society partners. This locally grounded ecosystem became the backbone of a response that was rapid, principled and genuinely owned by the communities themselves.

Beyond the immediate assistance delivered in the aftermath of the earthquake, eight months on CESVI’s work under the “Toward Tomorrow Recovery in Nyaung Shwe” project⁵ offers a clear example of how the HDP nexus takes shape in practice. Backed by the EU’s Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM)⁶ and implemented through UNOPS, the initiative weaves together humanitarian response, longer-term recovery and livelihood support, and the “small p” dimensions of peace—social cohesion, inclusive dialogue and community-led decision-making—into a coherent, people-centred and locally anchored intervention.

The ability to implement such an approach is closely linked to the broader architecture that enables it. The European Union introduced the Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM) in Myanmar precisely to create the conditions for this kind of integrated action. Launched in 2020, the NRM represents far more than a pilot initiative: it signals a rethinking of how aid can be structured in fragile contexts. Unlike traditional approaches, the

5. The project adopts a holistic, community-driven recovery approach that addresses the interlinked challenges of disaster recovery, environmental degradation, and socio-economic vulnerability. The approach is structured around three mutually reinforcing pillars: Resilient Shelter and WASH, Sustainable Livelihood Recovery, Environmental Stewardship and Community Preparedness.

6. <https://www.nexusresponsemechanism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NRM-Programme-Strategy-2020-2023.pdf>



“At a time when rising fragility is driving unprecedented humanitarian needs, coupled with a worrying trend of development donors’ disengagement, stepping back is simply not an option.”

mechanism functions through a dedicated governance system, bringing humanitarian and development actors together under a single Steering Committee and guided by a tailored monitoring and evaluation framework. Its pooled funding model—uniting resources from ECHO (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) and INTPA (EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships)—allows assistance to be deployed flexibly according to evolving needs rather than rigid budget lines. Implementation through UNOPS as a third-party provider further accelerates procedures, strengthens risk management and ensures the operational agility required in Myanmar’s volatile and access-constrained environment.

Therefore, rather than development actors progressively disengaging from Myanmar as insecurity deepened, the EU maintained and deepened its development engagement precisely because the NRM framework provided a way to make that engagement more flexible, conflict-sensitive, and coordinated with humanitarian response.

Under this framework, CESVI’s early work in Nyaung Shwe focused on meeting urgent needs while laying the groundwork for longer-term resilience. Emergency support was paired with measures that introduced higher technical and environmental standards, helping communities better withstand future shocks. As the response evolved, the intervention shifted toward restoring and strengthening livelihoods closely tied to the lake’s fragile ecosystem, promoting more sustainable practices that bridge the traditional divide between short-term relief and longer-term development.

The project also addresses the “small p” peace dimensions that are essential in a multi-ethnic area like Nyaung Shwe, where communities rely on shared natural resources. Here, the way assistance is delivered can influence local tensions. CESVI integrates conflict

sensitivity throughout the intervention, ensuring transparent decision-making, community participation and accessible feedback channels. By working through trusted local civil society actors, the initiative reinforces inclusive, bottom-up governance that communities perceive as legitimate. These approaches help reduce the risk of aid-related grievances and create space for dialogue and joint management of shared resources—laying the basis for preventing and managing potential conflicts over the longer term. Taken together, these elements demonstrate that community-driven, conflict-sensitive and ecosystem-anchored approaches like CESVI’s in Nyaung Shwe can generate credible results across the humanitarian, development and peace pillars of the nexus.

For the international community, Myanmar’s experience should serve as a call to scale what works. At a time when rising fragility is driving unprecedented humanitarian needs, coupled with a worrying trend of development donors’ disengagement, stepping back is simply not an option. The pathway from aspiration to operationalisation exists; the real question is whether the international community will commit the necessary arrangements, resources and long-term political will to make effective nexus implementation the norm rather than the exception.

Amélie Tapella, Advocacy Officer
CESVI ETS
www.cesvi.eu