

The Nexus Approach: bringing together climate, human security, and demographic change in times of permacrisis

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Executive summary

The beginning of a new institutional cycle and the creation of the European Council's Strategic Agenda will raise questions about the EU's ability to respond to multidimensional problems in a systemic and more conscious way.

In the interconnected areas of climate change, human security, and demographic transformation, the EU has been unable to end its silos approach and align its strategic objectives entirely. In its attempts to do so, the EU continues to stumble upon mobility as the pivot – and potential solution – to these multidimensional problems.

A holistic nexus approach that combines greater inter- and intra-institutional collaboration with strategic vision and principled leadership will be essential if the EU is to deliver on these complex challenges.

Above all, strategic nexus thinking shows that conscientious action in tackling multidimensional risks has the potential to significantly strengthen the EU's capacity to pursue its long-term interests and preserve its autonomy.

Introduction

The European Union has long been confronted with multidimensional emergencies characterised by a blend of environmental, mobility, governance, and security challenges. In the era of permacrisis, a rapid succession of multidimensional problems has put the EU's socio-economic system to the test.¹ The financial crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have brought to the fore how the effects of these complex emergencies reverberate far beyond the local context where they first ignite and do not stay within the confines of one policy area.

Following these events, the need to tackle the facets of the permacrisis holistically has gained salience in public discourse and traction with the governments of EU member states. Still, it is by no means a new idea.

Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors have long been at the forefront of addressing complex crises by strengthening coordination and joint programming along what has come to be known as the humanitarian-peace-development (HDP) nexus and building a greater understanding of how the causes of instability feed into each other.

With the beginning of a new institutional cycle approaching, the EU is yet again confronted with how to respond to permacrisis quickly, flexibly, and sustainably.² Revising deeply ingrained policy siloes is one lesson from the HDP nexus approach that should be transferred to other domains. But, beyond that, the nexus approach and its repository of practices have the potential to guide the EU in achieving a more coherent and effective strategic vision through prioritisation in strategic domains, striking the right balance between interests, values, multilateralism, and autonomy.

Therefore, a nexus approach could play an essential role in the EU's ability to deal with today's permacrisis, particularly regarding climate change, human security, and demographic transformations.

This Discussion Paper retraces the genesis of the nexus approach in humanitarian and development cooperation to draw lessons learned for the EU's strategic thinking around systemic and deeply interconnected problems. It shows how a conscious strategic vision, more coherence, and principled leadership will be crucial if the EU is to tackle complex challenges effectively.

1. Connecting the dots: The genesis of the nexus approach

The number of global conflicts has reached new heights and the number of people displaced by war, violence, and persecution.³ Conflicts have also become more protracted, while climate-related shocks and extreme weather events have become more intense and frequent. These factors have proven to be intertwined with the economic losses related to environmental degradation, food and water insecurity, exacerbating political instability and accelerating conflict dynamics.

These patterns of multidimensional instability have prompted humanitarian, development, and peace actors to engage in a systematic reflection on how they approach conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, and their interlinkages with poverty, resource ownership, and demographic pressure.⁴

Since 1994, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is the UN's highest-level coordination platform, has adopted a common definition of a complex emergency as a humanitarian crisis that happens in a power vacuum, a response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency; and demands extensive political and management coordination.⁵

Agreeing upon this definition served the pressing operational goal of systematising the 'dynamic link' between UN peacekeeping and peacemaking forces and humanitarian assistance operating on the ground.⁶

At the same time, this UN initiative made it clear that, in such contexts, looking at the causes of injustice and vulnerability in isolation undermines the ability to tackle the deeper roots of instability, potentially thwarting development prospects or further exacerbating conflicts.

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Since then, multilateral strategic thinking has focused on developing a coherent approach to complex emergencies along the Human-Development-Peace (HDP) triple nexus approach. The goal is to primarily achieve greater coherence and sustainability in addressing both immediate humanitarian needs and structural or pre-existing inequalities, thus improving development and peace prospects.⁷ This has been achieved by enabling UN agencies and other humanitarian and development actors to align their actions across sectors with respect to programming, operationalisation, and financing.⁸

Beyond the increased coordination potential of this approach, the innovative contribution of the HDP nexus lies in its ability to identify strategic priorities across areas and plan responses accordingly. On an operational level – if not structurally – this should make it possible to address the needs of the most vulnerable through clearer mandates and funding objectives.

Certainly, the implementation of the HDP nexus is far from fully successful, particularly when it comes to transforming this approach into practical actions. For example, the European Humanitarian Forum 2023, convened in Brussels by the European Commission, has underlined that in many humanitarian and development contexts, policy responses continue to remain fragmented, particularly when it comes to capturing the interactions of environmental risks with other sources of instability.⁹ The same applies to the financial aspects of the nexus implementation due to persistent barriers to transferring funds from development to humanitarian aid and vice versa.¹⁰

Still, considering the great potential of adopting the nexus approach, the list of UN agencies, multilateral organisations, and states that strive to act along the nexus and seek greater cross-sectoral collaboration keeps growing decades into its first elaboration. Beyond those sectors, the nexus approach also sets an example of navigating multidimensional crises in other policy areas.

2. The nexus Pandora box in the EU

The EU has made a considerable contribution to the proliferation of *Nexi* by identifying links through various policy documents, mechanisms, and initiatives. Although more remains to be done to fully overcome the siloisation of key policy areas.

Taking a clearly defined nexus approach would be beneficial in three areas: climate change, security, and demographic change. These areas are deeply intertwined in policy and practical terms. Furthermore, they could potentially drive the EU's strategic reflection in the coming years, starting with the new Commission mandate and the definition of the European Council's Strategic Agenda.

This is the case for the spill-over effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which have exposed a complex interplay of risks. The pandemic has had a far-reaching socio-economic impact, causing a fall in wages and output worldwide and driving approximately 120 million people into extreme poverty in 2020. This has also resulted in increased social inequalities and heightened risks of conflict in fragile contexts.¹¹

For its part, Russia's war on Ukraine has caused over 6 million refugees globally.¹² The effects of the war on food export and Russia's blockade of the Black Sea ports and unilateral export limitations have put global food markets and import-dependent countries under severe strain. This is likely to worsen food security and fuel political instability far beyond Europe's borders.¹³

Current challenges should be used to create momentum behind the use of the nexus approach to devise policy responses that are multidimensional, concerted, and combine immediate responses with longer-term structural considerations.

In this context, the current challenges should be used to create momentum behind the use of the nexus approach to devise policy responses that are multidimensional, concerted, and combine immediate responses with longer-term structural considerations. At the same time, as new *Nexi* emerge in a plethora of policy areas, it becomes necessary to reflect on what this approach can bring before it is watered down to a necessary but simplistic coordination imperative.

A CLIMATE NEXUS BLUEPRINT?

Climate change is now widely understood to be a 'risk multiplier' within displacement, conflict, energy access, livelihoods, and food security.¹⁴ The effects of rising temperatures and extreme weather events drive conflicts over resources, particularly under demographic pressure. Economic damages and loss of infrastructure fuel territorial disputes, feeding into a vicious circle of instability, particularly where governments are weak. These factors are intertwined in the Sahel region, where poverty, fast-paced demographic growth and a succession of military coups continue to lock the region in a spiral

of social tensions. In addition, the region's severe vulnerability to land degradation and desertification leads to unpredictable patterns of food and water availability, threatening traditional livelihoods, accelerating migration and displacement, and making these countries an "environmental fragility" hotspot.¹⁵

Despite recognising several risk factors amplified by climate change and acknowledging the need to approach this holistically, siloisation is still prevalent in the EU's action at the intersection of climate and development cooperation.

As a result, climate change has officially joined the list of nexus pivots with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New European Consensus on Development 'Our World, our Dignity, our Future', where the EU acknowledges the strong link between climate, mobility, and sustainable development.¹⁶ More recently, in its 2022 Staff Working Document, the European Commission has committed to ensure greater policy programming and coherence between its development, humanitarian and environmental policies.¹⁷

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However, the EU's track record of working to introduce more sustained, long-term adaption and mitigation measures is still insufficient, and the initiatives taken so far are primarily focused on climate risk reduction.¹⁸

Furthermore, climate change action still grapples with widespread silos thinking and rigid mandates. When it comes to mainstreaming climate considerations in humanitarian and development programming, the EU continues to face challenges in coordinating horizontally, at the institutional and headquarters level, as well as with the member states, to ensure that policies and instruments complement each other. Greater coherence should also be ensured vertically, working with funding institutions and actors on the field, including member states' embassies, agencies and international NGOs.¹⁹

HUMAN SECURITY

The multiple factors at play around climate change have impacts on human security as well. This concept refers to the "widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the

survival, livelihood, and dignity" of all people, calling for integrated responses from the UN system, governments, the private sector, civil society, and local communities.²⁰

The effects of climate change on human security are visible when considering the health risks connected to rising temperatures, changes in land use, and water and food security. This, in turn, amplifies social tensions. As of now, these risks are mostly experienced in third countries. The EU is nevertheless exposed to the transnational reverberations of conflicts, for example, through the instability and uncertainty around energy supplies. For the EU, the expected recurrence of pandemics and natural disasters are only going to exacerbate these risks.²¹

In July 2023, the European Commission published its first Joint Communication on the Climate-Security Nexus.²² While there is no legislative competence or budget line attached to this issue, the Communication sets the strategic priorities for the Commission's and the European External Action Service's work in this area, acknowledging the role of climate change in driving food and water scarcity, human displacement, infrastructure crisis and political instability, including in new theatres of geopolitical competition, like the Arctic.

Yet, the document falls short of acknowledging the strategic and security risks that characterise the new era of open confrontation with Russia, including the weaponisation of crucial resources such as oil and natural gas, critical minerals, and food.²³ Here, stronger coordination mechanisms between the concerned European Commission's Directorate Generals (DGs) and EEAS would be instrumental in addressing the intersection of climate security risks, geopolitical competition, and conflict.²⁴

However, funding and capacity remain a concern from a nexus perspective. The fact that the Joint Communication is not accompanied by corresponding financial resources speaks to the need for the incoming European Commission to invest more in the multidimensional analysis of security and reflect on whether the current institutional setup can deliver on interconnections.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: THE NEXUS BLIND SPOT

The third nexus challenge and opportunity for the EU to adopt a nexus approach is the rapidly unfolding global demographic transformation. This challenge is twofold, as it stems from demographic decline in the EU and population growth in developing countries.

On the one hand, the EU's demographic prospects are grim. Like all rich and middle-income countries globally, EU Member States are projected to face a rapidly shrinking and ageing society due to a mix of long life expectancy and low natality.²⁵ The natural population change in the EU has been negative for over a decade, and the temporary increase in population in 2022 is to be attributed to the positive net migration

resulting from the opening of borders after the COVID-19 related restrictions were lifted and refugee arrivals from Ukraine.²⁶

At the same time, in the least developed countries of the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the fall in mortality of the last decades has not been matched with a proportional decline in fertility. Nigeria, for example, went from 6.8 children per woman in 1980 to 5.2 children in 2022 and, its population is projected to reach around 475 million people by 2070.²⁷

Considering the poor prospect of proportionally successful development paths for these countries, demographic change is expected to lead to many unemployed youth, potentially fuelling social and political instability. The other facet of demographic change, i.e. shrinking populations in the EU, is already causing significant and unsustainable gaps in labour supply, particularly in strategic sectors such as construction, healthcare, and

ICT. These shortages are likely to increase as the working-age population declines from 265 million in 2022 to 258 million by 2030.²⁸ The green transition and the ensuing skills and employment needs are going to require further adjustments to the labour market, making these shortages even more acute.²⁹ While action in this field would be urgent, population change remains the blind spot of nexus thinking in the EU.

The EU's external migration policy is skewed towards stopping irregular migration and its needs and interests in filling up labour shortages have been subsumed under polarised narratives around this topic. Significantly, the EU has also tried and failed repeatedly to stop irregular migration, by cooperating with third countries without adequately pursuing its interests in the demographic transition and labour market needs, including, for example, by stepping up the efforts to facilitate legal migration pathways.

3. No policy without a strategy, no strategy without a policy

Overcoming policy siloes remains the most straightforward – even if hard to attain – takeaway from taking a nexus approach. However, this is not the only benefit of collaborating across the nexus.

Two further advantages of thinking and acting along the nexus in strengthening the EU's capacity to address multidimensional crises are i) identifying strategic priorities and trade-offs; and ii) greater policy coordination, both intra- and inter-institutionally.

PRIORITIES AND TRADE-OFFS

The first advantage concerns reconciling cross-policy initiatives with a clear strategic vision. The nexus should serve as an approach to pinpoint priorities, set objectives, and exploit synergies while avoiding policy siloes.

Identifying strategies is essential to avoid limiting actions to reactive mode and find ways to work more effectively in perennial crisis mode. This will involve a collective EU effort to navigate and communicate complexity in a context where thinking systematically rather than short-term is going to be more in demand.

Concretely, and drawing on the IASC systematisation, taking a nexus approach entails identifying 'nexus pillars', i.e. the areas that should take strategic priority, and, then, 'collective outcomes', i.e. 'jointly envisioned results', which require the collaboration of all stakeholders involved.³⁰ Here, the challenge for the EU is to agree on a shared understanding of what the nexus means and translate it into a strategy – in addition to a set of policies.

Systematising action across the nexus pillars of the green transition, security, and demographic change will also entail trade-offs. Achieving food security, for instance, might have environmental implications that slow down the green transition. In the short-term, limiting migration indiscriminately will have to be balanced with labour market needs. Lastly, relying on third countries for migration management and labour supply risks restricting the EU's strategic autonomy if not steered appropriately.

Understanding the implications and ramifications of policy links is already a step towards deciding what to prioritise and anticipate the negative consequences of cross-sectoral actions. Once set, higher priorities should also be integrated into a coherent approach where synergies, and not only trade-offs, come to the fore to minimise costs.

The challenge for the EU is to agree on a shared understanding of what the nexus means and translate it into a strategy – in addition to a set of policies.

Ultimately, a clear strategic vision and more coherence will increase the capacity of the EU to avoid the reactive mode that has been prevalent in addressing the latest crises and plan ahead more ambitiously.

COORDINATION

Alongside strategic cross-sectoral thinking, the second advantage of applying the nexus approach in times of permacrisis would be to bring about greater institutional coordination. The alignment of policy priorities should be reflected and operationalised in the institutional set-up and capacity of the EU institutions.

In this respect, political mandates continue to stand in the way of the full-fledged adoption of the nexus approach, notably in development cooperation. The area of effective climate responses offers a telling

example of how institutional obstacles remain even when policy coordination has improved. In this respect, it would be crucial to strengthen coordination within the Commission, particularly among the DGs involved in nexus pillars, such as DG for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), International Partnerships (INTPA), European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), Migration and Home Affairs (HOME), and Climate Action (CLIMA). This could involve ad hoc mechanisms and permanent intra-institutional platforms to drive the EU's work on cross-cutting topics.³¹

4. Another layer of complexity: Cooperation with third countries

The Team Europe approach recently adopted in the EU showcases the potential advantages but also the inherent challenges of implementing a nexus approach through cooperation with third countries. Adopted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Team Europe gathers EU institutions, member states, implementing agencies, and public development banks, including the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). It seeks to bring together all these actors and their resources to increase the EU's development impact and geopolitical standing while also channelling the collective ambition to deliver on the EU's strategic interests. These include, most notably, the green transition, human development, sustainable growth, the digital transition, and peace and security.³²

The approach is embodied in a series of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) to be rolled out at the country or regional level through the EU's €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) allocated to cooperation with third countries for 2021-2027.

While its concrete implementation is still unclear, Team Europe has the potential to represent a step forward in devising nexus responses. Its policy driven, multilevel and multidimensional approach strikes a valid point. So does the effort in bringing together EU institutions, governments, and implementing agencies in the EU's quest for a unified voice on development cooperation.

At the same time, Team Europe leaves several questions unanswered regarding i) the alignment of the EU's and its partners' interests ii) and principled leadership.

In the first respect, engaging in truly levelled relations with partner countries remains a challenge and should be prioritised, if the ambition is to develop mutually beneficial policies and actions in a context marked by geopolitical uncertainty affecting all countries. So far, Team Europe has instead been a largely EU-

driven and Eurocentric process.³³ In the inception stage, this approach might have been necessary to garner support from the member states.³⁴

Yet, this has remained the same, with TEIs having so far delivered the clear message that the EU's interests come first. Despite efforts by the EU delegations to meaningfully include partner countries in TEIs since the early programming stage, their ownership has remained an afterthought and mostly postponed to the implementation stage.³⁵ This can hardly lead to long-lasting partnerships capable of tackling multidimensional challenges and enhancing the effectiveness of EU cooperation.

This is certainly clear in the migration area, where the EU increasingly relies on third-country cooperation to manage migration outside its borders but stops short of engaging in mutually beneficial relationships beyond a dubiously effective mix of positive and negative conditionalities.³⁶

Given the weak premises of these cooperation agreements, it should not come as a surprise that the memorandum of understanding signed by the EU and Tunisia over the summer under the Team Europe banner does not seem to be faring well. Shortly after the deal, and amidst widespread human rights concerns, Tunisian President Saied declared that the country would not become the EU's refugee camp, casting doubts as to whether the agreement would be of any use for the EU's externalisation purposes.

The EU should show principled leadership when forming partnerships to ensure that rights, the rule of law, and the cross-sectoral consequences of development cooperation do not become marginal.

A second challenge is that the EU should show principled leadership when forming partnerships to ensure that rights, the rule of law, and the cross-sectoral consequences of development cooperation do not become marginal.

Striking this balance may prove especially difficult. Actors working across the HDP nexus have been highlighting the challenges of working with governments in contexts where the space for civil society and human rights is reducing. In this respect, the HDP nexus track record also indicates the importance of putting in place accountability mechanisms and working with foreign local and national authorities without compromising human rights, political rights or freedoms nor exacerbating existing tensions and grievances.³⁷

Here, the deal with Tunisia is again a case in point. The EU has supported Tunisia's democratic transition, but the

pivot of their relations now seems to sit squarely within the migration domain, neglecting the country's slide into authoritarianism. This approach has been strongly criticised by civil society and human rights organisations that see border management dominating other concerns, including those regarding migrants' rights and the internal stability of the country.

A partnership that disregards these implications is problematic – let alone unethical – both because it could lead to further instability and because it shows that the EU's short-term objectives in specific areas, i.e. the reduction of irregular migration, push to the margins of other interests. This choice does not reflect an articulated vision of how migration can contribute to meeting the EU's labour market needs. This ends up reducing the EU's strategic autonomy rather than working towards it.

Conclusion

With the European Parliament elections and the start of a new institutional cycle around the corner, 2024 will be a test for strategic nexus thinking. The definition of the new Strategic Agenda to be adopted by the European Council in June should accompany the Union's reflection on how to respond to permacrises in a more conscious and structured fashion.

This reflection will be, first and foremost, about what strategic priorities to pursue and how to deal with strong interdependencies. The question should be, for example, how nexus thinking can help the Union find the right balance between its interests and non-negotiable values. Similarly, this approach should guide the Union towards striking the right balance between multilateralism and autonomy.

While reconciling EU's and national short-term policy interests with principled actions may raise complex ethical questions, adopting a nexus approach also shows that such actions can strengthen the EU's broader interests in the long run, beyond more narrowly defined policy objectives.

The potential of the new nexus thinking and attempts at its operationalisation show that today's systemic and interconnected problems demand a holistic approach in a wide range of policy areas. Strategic vision, principled leadership, and much more coherent collaboration are going to be crucial for the EU to tackle complex crises in a way that is both effective and truthful to its normative power.

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