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Advocacy Briefing
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with women and girls



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Leading the Way: The Nexus Through a Feminist Lens

A call to the UK Government to avoid siloed working across the overlapping humanitarian, climate, development and peacebuilding contexts

Introduction

Drought, displacement, and rising food insecurity are putting women and girls at increased risk of gender-based violence.

As new and recurring conflicts become increasingly protracted, it is clear that revitalised discussions are needed on how best to work across these overlapping areas – termed ‘the Nexus’. The Nexus describes the interaction between humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding contexts and efforts. There is an urgent need to ensure responses take into account the interconnection of these contexts, and to ensure they focus on preparedness, long-term sustainability, and recovery. This is what we describe as ‘operationalising the Nexus’. Currently, international community programmes tend to operate in isolation, ultimately leading to a less successful and sustainable response. The failure of international actors to address the root causes of discrimination that women and girls face in crisis-affected contexts, leads to emergency responses which do not meet the holistic needs of communities.

Enhancing alignment across the UK Government’s commitments in the existing humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding commitments to gender equality is crucial. By adopting an integrated approach, the UK Government can bolster policies prioritising impacted communities and dismantling social barriers to equity and equality. This intersectional approach would represent progress towards a more just and equitable UK foreign policy agenda.

This briefing summarises ActionAid’s Nexus research which provides new insights on humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and climate action, by shining a spotlight on the experiences of girls, women’s rights and women-led organisations (WROs and WLOs) in Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar and Somaliland.

Using this research, ActionAid has formed recommendations for the UK Government in 3 key thematic areas:

1) Programme Design and Implementation:

The UK Government must integrate gendered context analysis into the design and delivery of all programmes.

2) Funding Modalities: The UK Government must provide dedicated funding to gender-sensitive programmes, offer more opportunities for civil society to improve coordination between contexts, and prevent funding channel siloes.

3) Meaningful Partnerships: The UK Government must ensure the meaningful participation of, and access to, WROs and WLOs in international conversations.

The UK Government has highlighted the necessity for gender-sensitive peacebuilding and improved coordination between inclusive development, climate, humanitarian and development responses. However, current policies, and siloed approaches of short-term planning, often focusing on immediate relief rather than long-term resilience, undermines efforts to build sustainable peace and climate adaptation. The lack of cohesive long-term strategies and flexible funding mechanisms limits the effectiveness of interventions and dismisses the role of local actors.

While the UK has made commitments to integrate a more cohesive approach, these efforts remain inconsistent, often treating climate and peacebuilding as a separate issue rather than fully integrating it into humanitarian and development discussions. A siloed approach reduces the effectiveness of responses: complex political environments and protracted crises simply do not conform to the humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding divisions which we see reflected in historic UK’s Nexus commitments.

These recommendations aim to address these gaps, to allow the UK to enhance policy coherence across the UK’s Nexus related commitments, and adopt more adaptive and flexible programming to meet the complex challenges posed by the intersection of Nexus approaches.

Background to the Nexus and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda:

Working in siloed ways between humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding activities does not serve the diverse needs of the people who work tirelessly across humanitarian, climate development and peacebuilding responses.¹

ActionAid knows that emergency needs are often symptoms of underlying issues that make people and societies more prone to marginalisation. By incorporating peace and the importance of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) into the approach, we acknowledge the importance of conflict resolution and prevention in ending humanitarian need, reducing poverty, and ensuring sustainable development. Yet the relationship between conflict resolution and ending humanitarian need has drawn criticism for being under-researched – and the role of gender analysis and the inclusion of WROs and WLOs is often missed out.

It’s crucial to understand the background to the Nexus and the inclusion of the WPS agenda in humanitarian action. The timeline on the right captures key dates in the ongoing debate.

Domestically, states’ restrictions on civic spaces, including in the UK and in nations receiving UK ODA, impede the capacity of women leaders and their organisations to advocate for their rights. This limits gender-transformative humanitarian action and underestimates the role of local organisations in advancing the Nexus.

In the 1990s, initial discussions on the Nexus centred around the Linking Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development (LRRD) framework, which aimed to improve transitions between humanitarian, rehabilitation, and development activities. However, aligning these areas proved challenging, with uncertainty about collaboration points between different actors.

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, which focused on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). This resolution mandated the prevention of women’s rights violations in conflict, and supported their involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. However, following the 9/11 attacks, international development became aligned more closely with global security concerns. This stalled progress on the Nexus, as humanitarian and development budgets were redirected towards security and stabilisation efforts.

By the late 2000s, the growing need for humanitarian assistance sparked new discussions on emergency response. There was a move away from the securitisation of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) towards models that incorporated risk and conflict sensitivity, acknowledging that emergency needs often stem from underlying vulnerabilities. The World Humanitarian Summit, and the Grand Bargain in 2016, introduced global commitments to better integrate peacebuilding within humanitarian and development approaches. In 2019, The New Way of Working steering committee was set up to strengthen collaboration in the UN development system.

From the 2020s, the Covid-19 pandemic and rising number of protracted and volatile disasters and conflicts highlighted the critical role of local and national actors (particularly WROs and WLOs) in humanitarian and conflict response. Despite recent calls for radical changes in funding and partnerships, the humanitarian system remains fragmented, failing to integrate women’s rights and gender equality into policy and programmes.

Key links with the UK Commitments:

2016: Penholder to the Women Peace and Security UNSC resolution 1325

The UK Government is penholder to the UNSC resolution 1325, giving them a key leadership role for the thematic since 2016.

2016: Grand Bargain

A unique agreement between some of the world's largest donors and humanitarian organisations. The UK is a signatory and has pledged to "making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary".

2022: Humanitarian Framework

The UK Humanitarian Framework sets out how the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office will deliver government commitments on humanitarian preparedness and response. This includes strengthening the delivery, leadership and decision-making of local and national actors, specifically women led organisations.

2022: International Development Strategy

This document sets out the UK Government's new approach to international development. It highlights the need for the UK's approach to development to be anchored in long-term, accountable partnerships tailored to the needs of the countries we work with.

2023: International Climate Finance

(ICF) strategy The ICF is a cross-government commitment to spend £11.6 billion from 2021 to 2026 to help Majority World countries tackle climate change and reduce poverty. It focuses on four priority areas: clean energy, nature for climate and people, adaptation and resilience, and sustainable cities, infrastructure and transport. The ICF does not mention women and girls.

2023: Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (NAP)

The NAP sets out the UK Government's commitment to reduce the impact of conflict on women and girls. The NAP's objectives are (1) Increase women's meaningful participation, leadership and representation in decision-making

processes; (2) Prevent gender based violence, including conflict related sexual violence, and support survivors to recover and seek justice; (3) Support the needs of women and girls in crises and ensure they can participate and lead in responses; (4) Increase the accountability of security actors, institutions and systems to women and girls and ensure they are responsive to their rights and needs, and (5) Ensure the UK responds to the needs of women and girls as part of our approaches to transnational threats.

2023: Women and Girls Strategy

This outlines commitments to advance gender equality globally. The strategy emphasises girls' education and women's empowerment, aiming to support 10 million women with sexual and reproductive health services. By 2030, the UK Government aims to have at least 80% of its funded programs targeting gender equality.

2023: International Development White Paper

This policy document outlines the UK Government's approach to international aid. The White Paper focuses on economic development, trade, and private sector investment as key strategies for addressing global poverty. The paper commits to amplifying women's voices in policy dialogues, prioritising gender equality, and moving towards an intersectional approach.

What does this mean for the UK Government?

The UK Government's approach to implementing the humanitarian, development, peace and climate nexus, has faced several challenges, due to fragmentation between policy areas and funding streams. This fragmentation has led to siloed approaches and a lack of policy coherence across the UK's Nexus-related commitments. For example, currently 48% of the ICF programmes do not apply the gender marker, despite the prioritisation of women in girls in both the White Paper on International Development and the UK's International women and girls strategy; with limited mention of peacebuilding within the UK's Humanitarian Framework. Where there is intent for better coordination across nexus related commitments, such as through the WPS NAP, there is insufficient funding and operational planning, which have hampered plans to effectively implement these initiatives.

Snapshot of Key Findings:

The failure of international actors to address the root causes of gender discrimination has led to emergency responses in conflict and climate affected regions, that are not fit for purpose. Our research found the following challenges and practical considerations for international actors and donors:

1. Challenges and need for Gender Transformative programming



Women and girls are often marginalised... only when you understand the needs of the community can you understand how to respond, and that is the only way to promote development and facilitate peace.

Research participant from Haiti

Patriarchal attitudes make women and girls disproportionately affected in crisis contexts, and addressing the structural inequalities experienced by women and girls is vital to achieving more resilient communities. Participants shared that rising commodity prices after an emergency impact women more adversely, as they are often responsible for household chores and more likely to skip a meal to support their families. The marginalisation of women and girls during and after emergencies is further exacerbated when existing gender inequalities intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as sexual orientation, race, gender identity, age, ethnicity or disability. WROs from Myanmar reported that LGBTQ+ women were less likely to participate in activities due to discrimination, leading to a reduced understanding of the needs of these women.

Economic inequality and limited social protection

Women tend to be overrepresented in informal, low-paid and precarious employment and are often the first to lose their jobs when a crisis hits. Research participants shared that this was particularly heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw women and girls shoulder the burden of additional care responsibilities. WROs and WLOs raised concerns that shrinking economic opportunities for women were leading to a loss of autonomy.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and health impacts of emergencies

The increase in GBV during and after an emergency – just as GBV response services shrink – was highlighted by participants as one of their biggest concerns. They reported increases in intimate partner violence, sexual violence, forced marriage and a denial of access to sexual and reproductive health services. The male-dominated and militarised nature of planning processes for emergency responses in conflict affected regions was also flagged as further increasing the risk of sexual violence, and the lack of adequate reporting mechanisms creates a culture of silence. Inconsistent or absent funding for health care during emergencies has a profound effect on the safety and wellbeing of women and girls.

2. WRO & WLO practical considerations for operationalising the Nexus



When [humanitarian response] happens in a society that has pre-existing discrimination and longstanding needs, responding to the emergency per se in a segregated way is not enough – it is a cumulation of compounding impacts.

Research participant from Lebanon

Across the four countries surveyed, 95% of WROs and WLOs stated the need for better linkages between the different strands of work INGOs do in supporting crisis, climate and conflict affected communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from an emergency. It was perceived that INGOs and donors tend to respond to rapid-onset emergencies and rarely consider longer-term response and resilience building. Donors need to consider the following for funding programmatic work:

The need for gendered and context-specific analysis in funding

Across all contexts, participants stated that international actors undertake humanitarian activities without fully understanding the context of the country they are working in, which leads to a lack of awareness of the needs of the communities they are trying to reach, especially women and girls. WROs and WLOs mentioned that even when donors undertake

context-specific analysis, they are inflexible in changing their donor requirements. This often means WROs and WLOs are unable to receive funding for ongoing activities, and/or feel forced to change their scope of work to be able to get funding when a new onset emergency occurs. This often siloes responses and does not fully account for the community's needs.

Moving away from short-term relief to invest in long-term development

Research respondents felt that humanitarian responses deliver periodic short-term relief for the symptoms of crises rather than investment in communities' resilience against future crises. Short-term approaches deepen structural inequalities by failing to respond to the long-term needs of those at greatest risk of marginalisation, or to tackle the structural inequalities.

3. Towards Sustainable Change and Building meaningful partnerships



For the community, WROs represent hope. Even if their needs are not met, it is good to have a group that takes these women's issues seriously.

Research participant from Myanmar

WLOs and WROs have been operationalising the Nexus by adopting nuanced ways of linking response, preparedness and long-term sustainability while also addressing structural inequalities and developing peace and recovery processes. Yet, they are not given the recognition or funding they require.

Women's leadership and role in humanitarian access, climate adaptation and conflict resolution

Our research shows that despite lacking adequate funding and recognition, women's leadership is sustained during crises due to the adaptability of women-led organisations. They are often central to building trust with and gaining access to communities at risk of marginalisation, and meeting their diverse needs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, WROs and WLOs were able to occupy spaces INGOs and donors struggled to access.

Addressing barriers and access decision-making spaces

Despite often being best placed to respond, women and girls are frequently marginalised or excluded from decision-making and planning processes. Limitations on women's access to these spaces are framed by patriarchal attitudes which disregard women's voices and experiences, as well as institutional barriers imposed by international actors such as language and financial requirements. Women participants from all the countries cited these barriers as hindering their ability to meaningfully participate in meetings set up by INGOs and international donors. WROs and WLOs sought more effective information sharing and more opportunities for collaboration, networking and capacity building.

Recommendations to the UK Government



Meaningful development is about building something sustainable, limiting ourselves to relief work [...] does not help people to evolve and improve their conditions.

Research participant from Somaliland

The UK Government often emphasises the need for gender-sensitive peacebuilding and alignment between inclusive development, climate and humanitarian response. Nevertheless, limited funding and operational plans have been put in place to drive policies forward, namely the aforementioned NAP, and commitments through frameworks such as International Development Strategy, and the Women and Girls strategy, which still work in siloes. This is mirrored by the \$300 Million decline in UK Government's ODA spending on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution from 2016 to 2021.² ActionAid believes the UK Government should develop a framework for ODA spending which operationalises meaningful approaches across development, peacebuilding, humanitarian and climate action. This will support them to honour their stated commitments, including the Grand Bargain and Beijing-1325.

In line with the findings of our research, we are making the following recommendations to the UK Government:

1. Programme Design and Implementation:

The UK Government must integrate gendered context analysis into the design and delivery of all programmes. This includes:

- Undertaking comprehensive gender analysis when planning for emergency responses in order to understand and respond to the intersectional needs of women and girls working in crisis-affected contexts. This includes conducting Gendered-Sensitive Conflict (GSCA) analysis for all humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes to document and understand the root causes of conflict, and recognising gender norms as a driving factor of conflict. GSCA should inform Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Business Plans in humanitarian, peacebuilding and development contexts to ensure the UK's plans are context specific and respond directly to community needs.
- Addressing GBV during and after emergencies by increasing funding resources for GBV response services and strengthening reporting mechanisms for GBV survivors.
- Ensuring staff and funding partners who are working in relevant contexts are trained on the necessity of a local, Nexus-led approach and gender-sensitive conflict analysis.

2. Funding Modalities:

The UK Government must provide dedicated funding to gender-sensitive programmes and offer more opportunities for civil society to improve coordination between contexts and prevent funding channel siloes. This includes:

- Guaranteeing that programme initiatives, including funding mechanisms, are long term and offer flexibility and alignment with the self-defined priorities of local organisations.

- Simplifying funding criteria, especially for emergency response financing, to create application procedures which are accessible to WROs and WLOs.

- Increasing the proportion of UK ODA reaching WROs and WLOs, and measure and publish these figures. This will adhere to Grand Bargain commitments by streamlining reporting requirements for local organisations.

- Upholding the UK Government's commitment in the Women and Girls Strategy to allocate 80% of ODA spend on Gender Equality, working with WRO and WLOs to develop a collaborative plan.

3. Meaningful Partnerships:

The UK Government must ensure the meaningful participation of, and access to, WROs and WLOs in international conversations. This includes:

- Forming strategic partnerships that champion the representation of national and local WROs and WLOs in policy and programmatic planning, humanitarian efforts, and recovery mechanisms. This will support on commitments in the NAP.
- Holding consultations and open dialogues with WROs and WLOs to remove barriers to their meaningful engagement, such as travel and security restrictions, financial constraints, and provision of translation.
- Ensuring that consultations and objectives in the NAP contribute effectively to decisions on the UK's country business plans and trade, promoting policy coherence and honouring WPS commitments across government departments and policies.
- Enhance WROs and WLOs' meaningful participation in peacebuilding processes, by investing in their access to international conversations and advocating for their participation in national decision-making platforms.

This briefing was produced by Niki Ignatiou, Julia Rosell Jackson and Jessica Haskins at ActionAid UK.

This advocacy briefing summarises the key points of ActionAid's research on the Nexus: ActionAid Leading the Way The Nexus through a Feminist Lens

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