Improving your Programmatic Learning Journey

A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus Practitioners

Module 1. Introduction and Tips on Using the Resource Guide

Knowledge
Platform
**Security &
Rule of Law**

# Module 1. Introduction and Tips on Using the Resource Guide

This resource guide is intended to serve as a resource and reference for practitioners, policymakers and others working in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) nexus and interested in better understanding the issues of learning and programmatic learning, how programmatic learning occurs, how uptake following learning happens, and what prevents more consistent and meaningful uptake. It may also serve as a launchpad for further discussions and debates on these issues, feeding into a process of ongoing and iterative reflection and learning.

It is based on in-depth discussions with seven organisations and initiatives in late 2023 and early 2024 and a survey of relevant literature. It is one element of the broader, multi-year Programmatic Learning Instrument (PLI) of the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL). [1]

The term "HDP nexus" will be used as a shorthand to refer to the broad interconnected and interlocking activities that comprise work in the humanitarian, development and peace sectors. The development of this concept is an ongoing process aimed at not only a conceptual rethink, but promoting structural shifts needed to enable more effective work in and across these domains. The security and rule of law focus of the KPSRL, the focus areas of the other Dutch Knowledge Platforms, and many other international development and engagement initiatives fall under this broad HDP nexus rubric.

> *Conflicts are increasingly protracted; climate-related shocks are more intense and frequent. Both contribute to a cycle of vulnerability. Sustainable development and durable solutions to displacement are not possible without peace. Humanitarian relief, development programmes and peacebuilding are not serial processes: they are all needed at the same time.*
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> - The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: What does it mean for multi-mandated organizations? (Oxfam, 2019)
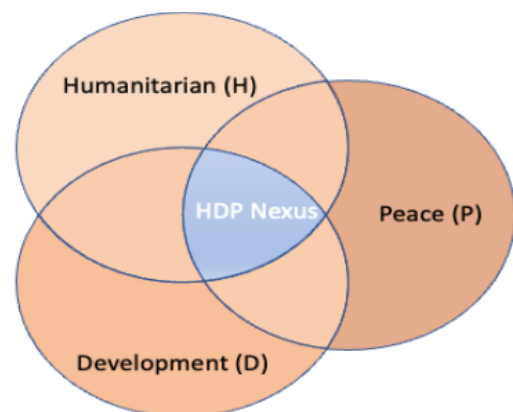
This document has been structured to offer food for thought to a variety of audiences with a diverse interests and needs. While it is aimed at being more practice-oriented than theoretical, the range of potential practitioners is wide, including those working with civil society organizations (CSOs) on the ground, in intermediary organizations, or in head offices; those working with civil society organizations (CSOs) on the ground, in intermediary organizations, or in head offices; those working with donors or large regional or international organizations; those with a speciality in programme design, monitoring, evaluation and learning; and those working in development, aid or diplomatic positions (particularly if they have the opportunity to engage in programmes and field work). For individuals new to programmatic learning, this resource guide can provide an entry point and survey

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[1] Additional insights will be available as the KPSRL PLI-funded pilot projects complete their two-year cycle and are reviewed in late 2024.

of relevant issues. For the more experienced, it offers perspectives on the topic from the view of practitioners working in a post-COVID environment in which there is shrinking civic space and both emerging opportunities and threats by IT and AI.

This resource guide – available as a single downloadable PDF and as a series of online modules – may be used in different ways. Some may feel inclined to read the materials from start to finish. Others may use the table of contents or online module tabs to jump to specific issues of interest. Others may scan the references to identify existing literature, reports, toolkits and guides to reflect on how they can use them and/or why the words on paper so often differ from the operating on-the-ground reality.

Figure 1: Resource Guide Structure Summary

Module	Focus
1. Introduction and Tips on Using the Resource Guide	Introduction to the guide and user tips / Overview by the authors
2. Methodology and Definitions	Briefly explains the collaborative study process and principles, and the definition of programmatic learning
3. Learning and Uptake: A Conceptual Framework	Briefly surveys academic, practical and policy literature that informs thinking about learning and uptake in order to provoke an analytical basis for engaging with the topic The blend of academic, practical and pracademic sources explores factors and dynamics that can enhance or detract from learning and uptake opportunities
4. Learning in Practice: Examples, Experiences and Reflections from the Case Studies	Provides examples from the case studies and others about strategies that can support the learning, reflection, and uptake cycle Readers will see concrete ways that the case studies are learning or trying to facilitate learning and uptake, some of which may be useful in their own practice
5. The Challenges of Learning and Uptake in Complex Environments	Brings together the information reviewed in the literature and heard through the case study experiences to move a step beyond the programmatic
6. Recommendations	Provides recommendations for next steps in thinking about programmatic learning to maximize impact Readers from both policy and practice will be encouraged to think about what may be done in the short- or long-term to facilitate more effective learning and uptake
7. Annexes	7.1 Glossary: Short descriptions of selected concepts referenced in the guide 7.2 Case study snapshots: Two-page summaries on the seven case studies introduce these examples of real-world experience, and provide a basis for thinking about learning in practice 7.3 Bibliography: Extensive list of references used in the collaborative study 7.4 Primary Data Collection – Interviews and Learning Calls 7.5 About the KPSRL 7.6 About the authors

The guide is structured to make it easy to locate the most relevant information. In addition to the narrative, key issues are highlighted in summary boxes, and examples and summaries of tips and lessons are presented for easy reference. Case study experiences are included in standalone text boxes and peppered throughout the text. At the end of each module there are reflection questions to provide an opportunity to place the content into the reader's own experience.

The aim of this document is not to suggest that some tool or toolkit can solve the dilemmas inherent in a process of programmatic learning and uptake, or which can provide simple answers. It is rather to demonstrate how excellent people and organisations working on various aspects of the HDP Nexus are currently finding ways to improve learning, and how they are overcoming constraints to learning and uptake. It is clear that these practitioners are constrained by factors including the number of hours in a day, reporting and accountability requirements, and a funding and implementation ecosystem which fosters competition and limits systemic learning; however, they are managing to engage in meaningful learning notwithstanding. The bigger policy aim should be to ensure that that are more factors enabling their learning and uptake processes, and fewer impediments.

1.1 Overview by the Authors

This resource guide is based on a collaborative study of the ways that programmatic learning is currently being approached in practice, to better understand current trends among practitioners and in the literature, and to contribute to improved learning. It is clear that in the domains of development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding, concepts like learning, knowledge management, adaptive programming and others have been substantially considered over the past two decades, and the number of toolkits and resources focused on learning has rapidly grown. Interlocutors engaged during this study recognize the role that programmatic learning can play in their work, how uptake can improve their performance and results, and the links to long-term impact. Yet despite this growing attention for and appreciation of learning, it is also clear that recommendations about how to improve learning and knowledge have not always resulted in uptake or implementation.

There are two predominant narratives that emerge from the collaborative study and extensive consideration of these issues. One emerges from the side of those disbursing programmatic money, whether that may be a government MFA/development agency, a donor body, an international financial institution like the World Bank, or international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) serving as donor intermediaries responsible for disbursing funds to local partners through programmes and projects. This narrative tends to be prescriptive in its approach, with an emphasis on offering toolkits, capacity-building resources, trainings, checklists, and tips on how to learn and how to use and manage knowledge. This narrative suggests that the lack of engagement in learning, or insufficient uptake of learning, reflects a lack of knowledge, ability, or interest in learning and integrating better tools and skills.

The other emerges from the side of those receiving donor funds/programmatic money, representing a variety of implementers ranging from the large and global to the hyper-local; the actors involved in implementing programmes "in the field". This narrative focusses on the idea that such organisations are well aware of the methods, tools, IT systems and other mechanisms of collecting, validating, reflecting on and implementing knowledge. However, if this is not being sufficiently done,

it is not due to a lack of knowledge of what should be done, or limited skills, or will, but to the hard reality of a lack of time, money, and personnel to do this. This points to the need for more understanding amongst donors as to what it actually takes for such organisations to learn and ensure uptake in practice, and more flexibility on their part to practically engage with actors on the receiving side of the relationship. Individuals offering this perspective note that the combination of the decline of core funding and the ever-increasing reliance on short-term project funding makes meaningful and cumulative knowledge capture, learning, reflection, and uptake nearly impossible. They also observe that they work in an environment in which surrounding policies and political factors create complicated dynamics for programme implementation.

Both narratives offer food for thought. Implementing organisations note they would welcome having more time to learn from practice; to contribute to knowledge platforms; to review the theory and practice examples; to build, update and translate robust data management and IT systems, perhaps even including AI. However, even in cases where perhaps 5%, or even 10% of a project budget is allocated in support of monitoring, evaluation and learning (something that is more the exception than the rule), there is no realistic possibility to develop such structures and systems given the short timeframes associated with many programme budgets. This is not only a challenge for organisations that have been working for decades in a precarious funding framework; it is also a seemingly unachievable dream for less structured actors reaching across organisational boundaries –- such as knowledge platforms, communities of practice and networks – where members' interactions are key for learning how to achieve broader impact.

Further, there are important conversations to be had about the extent to which legacies of colonial and other power imbalances continue to affect these narratives and dynamics. Too often, a "teacher/student" mentality remains present between donors and "beneficiaries" in programmes in the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Nexus, even among those who proclaim to be committed to working in partnership and processes of collaboration and co-creation. And many are still inclined to shy away from engaging with "uncomfortable" questions about the fundamental nature and characteristics of this power imbalance, whether related to just using the term "decolonisation," or unpacking its cross-cutting implications. It is simplistic to frame this issue even in terms of a North-South divide, as even within the "North" and the "South" there are centre/ periphery, urban/rural, global/local distinctions characterized by uneven power relations and unidirectional flows in decision-making. While complex and multi-faceted, the key questions in any interaction should be: who has the power in this activity, in this programme, in this relationship? And, what are the implications of such power for what, why, and how action is taken, what is considered valuable for learning, and what is done with the results of learning?

This document serves as both a resource survey and a practical manifesto. It notes a number of reports, articles and toolkits, both to direct the interested reader to the tips within, but also to provide a launching point for discussion on why so much knowledge out there has not turned into uptake, let alone real impact. It shares experiences from seven case studies substantially engaged in this study, as well as additional interviews and discussions, and while these example may be useful or thought-provoking for readers, it is not aimed at being a prescriptive toolkit. Instead, it seeks to offer insights into how learning happens or does not happen in practice, and through these examples, to map out a direction for new approaches based on more bi-directional accountability, long-term partnerships and co-creation principles.

The most important insights came from in-depth discussions with seven organisations and initiatives

that agreed to participate in this study as case studies. They represent a variety of structures ranging from global and relatively traditionally structured organisations to the hyper-local, to communities of practice, professional networks, and grant-making bodies. While a diverse group, they all share a commitment to and ongoing grappling with the best ways to ensure that learning enables their staff and members to improve their work and contributes to incremental progress towards their shared mandate and mission. They also present a wide sweep of the challenges being faced by similar organisations and initiatives, such as: a constant struggle for resources in an environment in which an absence of core funding can make even the most rudimentary requirements of work difficult to sustain; a project mentality mindset that consumes time and resources while insufficiently appreciating the complexity of challenges; a lack of flexibility that prevents the entry of creative and innovative modes of work; a recognition that while IT and technology can offer many tools and opportunities that there is also a risk that this focus could further strain dwindling human resources and/or put people at risk; security concerns of staffing partners and communities engaged with in many parts of the world; worry that the good concept of co-creation is at risk of become jargon at best equated with "consultation"; and a sense of shrinking civic space.

This means that this study on programmatic learning drawing on practical experiences from various organisations cannot avoid paying attention to the conditions and larger context in which such learning is meant to take place. In this regard it is also important to acknowledge that constraints are not confined to implementing organisations or practitioner networks but extend to many donors as well. Large bilateral donors that have been long-standing champions of human rights, rule of law, democratisation and peacebuilding, are themselves subject to demands for accountability and efficiency that can (or are perceived to) limit their space for manoeuvring and flexibility, in spite of their understanding of the impact on partners in the field. This is even more so in changing domestic contexts where populism and nationalism are on the rise, militarised responses to insecurity and instability are favoured, and the continued existence of development cooperation is called into question the moment something untoward appears to happen. Simultaneously, there is also a growing recognition that existing approaches to accountability and achieving desired outcomes are in many cases not achieving their goals, leading to a new interest in co-creation as a way to achieve meaningful "local" ownership on the part of beneficiaries and more substantive and sustained outcomes.

As a result, decades of work in the HDP arena and the more recent emphasis on the need to "shift the power" and to "decolonise" activities, approaches to learning, attitudes and funding in these domains confirms that the learning that is required today needs to expand beyond the project and programme. It must begin to have an impact on the policy and the politics framing the ecosystem in which HDP actors work. There are positive signs that there are people on all sides of the equation prepared to take on this challenge, to take considered risks in support of innovation, and to re-imagine relationships in the interest of better results that are desired by everyone. This document aims to stimulate such conversations, and contribute to better learning, reflection and uptake.

1.2 List of Figures/Exhibits

1.3 Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CfP	Call for Proposals
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DME	Design, Monitoring and Evaluation
HDP Nexus	Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Nexus
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IO	International Organisation
IT	Information Technology
KP	Knowledge Platform
KPSRL	Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MFA	Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PL	Programmatic Learning
PLI	Programmatic Learning Instrument
SRoL	Security and Rule of Law