



Regleau Project: Haitian women involved in small businesses attended a competition promoting entrepreneurship in the water sector. Photo: Diano Darius

10 LESSONS FOR OPERATING IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fragility is a major challenge for local and international development cooperation. Today, the majority of people living in extreme poverty reside in fragile settings, where conflict, disasters, economic shocks and weaker systems undermine development gains and expose communities to repeated crises. Working effectively in these environments requires approaches that can respond to immediate needs while addressing the underlying drivers of fragility. Drawing on experiences from across Helvetas' work in fragile contexts, this publication presents ten lessons on what it takes to remain engaged, adaptive and effective in situations of uncertainty and rapid change

The lessons are structured around Helvetas' Fit for Fragility Framework, which is built on three interdependent building blocks: Nexus Approach, Adaptive Management and Agile Support. Together, these building blocks aim to ensure that programs can maintain continuity, adapt to changing conditions and contribute to longer-term outcomes even in highly volatile environments.

The first set of lessons focuses on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus. Helvetas' experience shows that programs in fragile contexts must be able to shift emphasis as conditions evolve, while maintaining continuity of engagement.

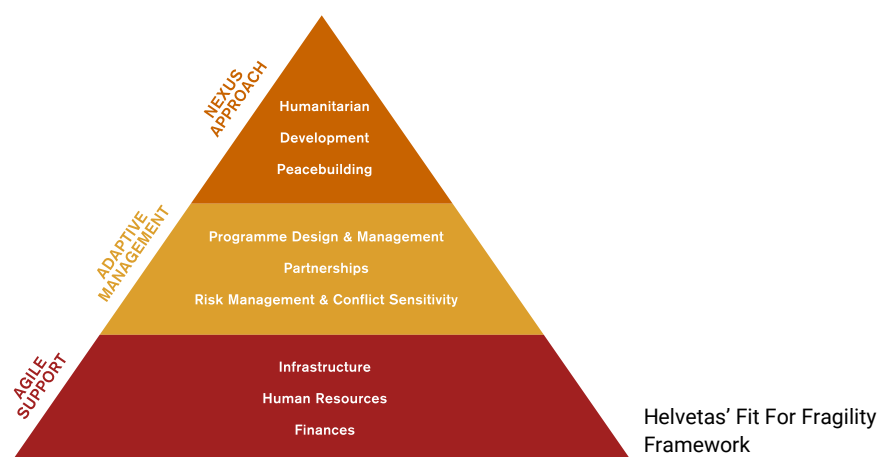
This requires planning flexibility from the outset, building nexus engagement on organizational comparative strengths, and going beyond conflict sensitivity to intentionally contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion.

The second set of lessons highlights the importance of adaptive management. Context is the primary reference point for decision-making. Programs need to remain grounded in continuous analysis of changing political, security, social and environmental conditions, while maintaining a clear long-term direction. Long-term relationships, trust, acceptance, and nationally and locally rooted partnerships play a central role in enabling adaptation and sustaining engagement.

The third set of lessons focus on agile support systems. Effective engagement in fragile contexts depends on the ability of financial, human resource, logistical and operational systems to adapt. Financial systems must be designed for disruption and increased costs. Staff require skills and profiles suited to working across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding. Infrastructure, communications and logistics arrangements must be tailored to the realities of insecurity and volatility, in the short and longer term.

The concluding lesson is that working in fragile contexts depends on navigating a series of trade-offs: between short-term response and long-term engagement, between flexibility and accountability, and between continuity of presence and acceptable risk.

Together these 10 lessons offer valuable guidance for Helvetas and others driven by a commitment to leave no one behind and to continue working in solidarity with communities living in situations of fragility.



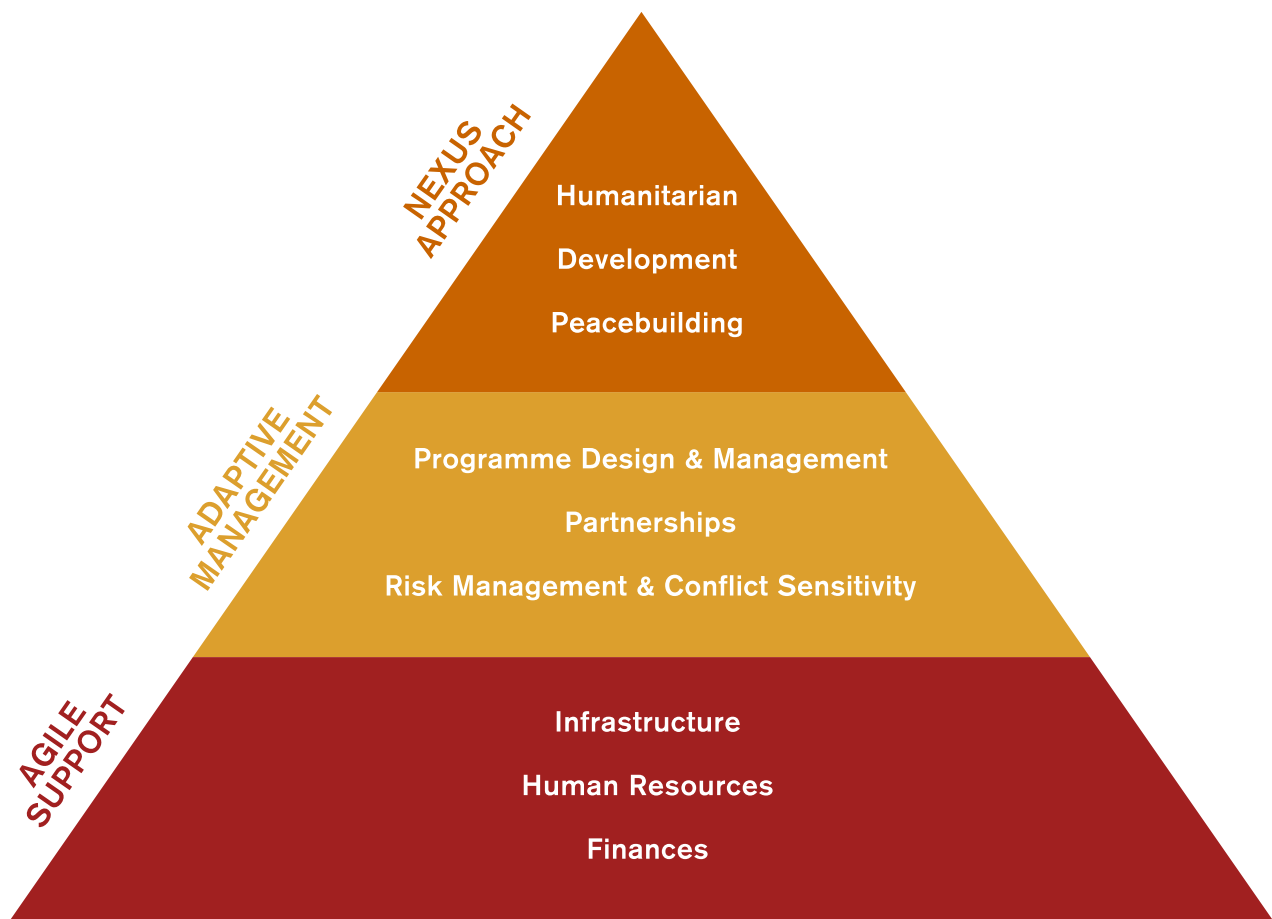
CONTENTS

Helvetas' approach to fragile contexts	5
Nexus approach: linking humanitarian, development and peace efforts	7
Lesson 1: Plan for continuity across shocks	7
Lesson 2: Build nexus engagement on comparative strengths	8
Lesson 3: Move beyond "do no harm" to intentional peacebuilding	8
Adaptive management : Responding to changes in fragiles contexts	12
Lesson 4: Let context drive decisions - within a coherent program framework	12
Lesson 5: Know what builds acceptance and where your red lines are	13
Lesson 6: Invest in local partnerships to strengthen adaptive capacity	16
Agile support: Enabling action in challenging environments	19
Lesson 7: Design financial systems for disruption and increased costs	19
Lesson 8: Invest in people and profiles that can work across the nexus and under fragility	20
Lesson 9: Tailor infrastructure and logistics to enable continuity	21
Conclusion	23
Lesson 10: Navigate fragility through conscious trade-offs rather than fixed rules	23
References	24

Transparency on the use of AI: The AI Generative tool Microsoft Copilot was used during the preparation of this publication to support drafting, structuring, and editing. AI was used as an aid to the authors and not as a substitute for professional judgement. All evidence, analysis, conclusions, and editorial decisions were subject to human review and validation at every stage.

Addressing the causes and consequences of fragility must be a global priority. Yet operating in fragile contexts is challenging. Drawing on concrete experiences from different contexts, this paper is intended for Helvetas' staff, peers, partners, donors and other stakeholders interested in how to work in fragile environments, how activities can be sustained under uncertainty, and how to remain operationally effective.

After introducing Helvetas' approach to fragile contexts, the paper presents ten operational lessons that illustrate what this approach looks like in practice. The lessons are derived from a series of interviews with staff supporting and managing programs in fragile contexts, with a particular focus on Burkina Faso (Fragile States Index 2024: rank 21) , Ethiopia (FSI 2024: 12), Haiti (FSI 2024: 9), Mali (FSI 2024 : 14), Myanmar (FSI 2024: 11), and Niger (FSI 2024 : 19). By sharing them here, we aim to contribute to ongoing reflection within the organization, and the wider sector, about what it takes to work effectively, safely and ethically in solidarity with people living in fragile situations.



Helvetas' Fit For Fragility Framework

HELVETAS' APPROACH TO FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Today, the majority of people living in extreme poverty are in fragile settings. According to [OECD](#) estimates, 72% of those in extreme poverty lived in contexts of high fragility in 2024. This proportion is expected to rise to 92% by 2040.

People living in fragile settings face high levels of risk due to conflict, disasters, political or economic shocks, while governments and institutions lack the capacity, legitimacy or willingness to respond effectively. In such situations, essential services break down, insecurity increases and communities are repeatedly pushed into crisis.

Helvetas is committed to remaining present and responsive in fragile contexts, to support communities in enhancing their resilience, strengthening local systems, and creating pathways toward more stable and inclusive development. As of 2025, Helvetas operates in 35 countries. Based on the [Fragile States Index 2024 scores](#), Helvetas identifies 12 of these as fragile contexts (having a fragility score of 80 or above), representing around 30% of the countries where we work.

Helvetas understands fragility as characterized by the following systemic weaknesses: limited state capacity to provide basic services and equitable economic development, challenges in upholding the rule of law through inclusive governance, and the inability to maintain a legitimate monopoly on the use of force while respecting human rights. At the same time, we recognize that fragility is highly contextual and multidimensional. It can be driven by a range of social, political, economic and environmental factors that vary from one setting to another.

By their nature, fragile and conflict-affected contexts are unpredictable and subject to rapid change, requiring flexible, adaptive and context-sensitive programming.

Helvetas' approach is guided by its [position paper](#) on development cooperation in fragile contexts (Marthaler and Turnheer, 2014), which sets out preconditions and principles for its engagement in fragile situations. Helvetas' Keeping [Fit for Fragility Action Plan \(2024\)](#) introduced the Fit for Fragility Framework to help structure the organization's approach to the practical challenges of operating in fragile settings.

The framework consists of three building blocks:

- **Nexus Approach:** integrating humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts to address both the immediate impacts and the structural drivers of fragility.
- **Adaptive Management:** designing and managing programs in ways that respond to context shifts, support conflict-sensitive and risk-aware decision-making, and adapt to operating environments where local partners play an even more central role.
- **Agile Support:** ensuring internal systems (HR, finance, logistics) are flexible and robust enough to enable operational continuity when changing conditions require it.

HELVETAS' IMPACT IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS IN 2025

In 2025, we directly reached **2,350,498 people** in fragile settings.

Water, climate resilience and disaster risk reduction

Access to water, climate resilience and disaster risk reduction are central in fragile environments where recurrent shocks repeatedly undermine livelihoods.

Our interventions on water, food and climate help stabilize living conditions and reduce the pressures that contribute to fragility.

Education and vocational training

Education and vocational training create alternatives for young people in settings where economic opportunities are limited, and instability affects job markets. Supporting skills development and income-generating opportunities are a critical way to strengthen resilience.

Governance, inclusion, migration and social cohesion

Governance, inclusion, migration and social cohesion are essential concerns in fragile contexts. Our interventions strengthen institutions and civic space, support people affected by migration, strengthen gender inclusion, and reinforce local capacities for preventing and managing conflict.

In 2025, with Helvetas support:

627,399 people in fragile contexts gained **access to drinking water** services

615,811 people in fragile contexts gained **access to sanitation services**

597,635 people in fragile contexts **improved their resilience to climate change** through climate adaptation measures, climate resilient livelihoods and strengthened natural resource management.

16,472 children, youth and adults in fragile contexts **completed basic education**

17,903 people in fragile contexts successfully **completed vocational education or training**, strengthening their employability and income opportunities

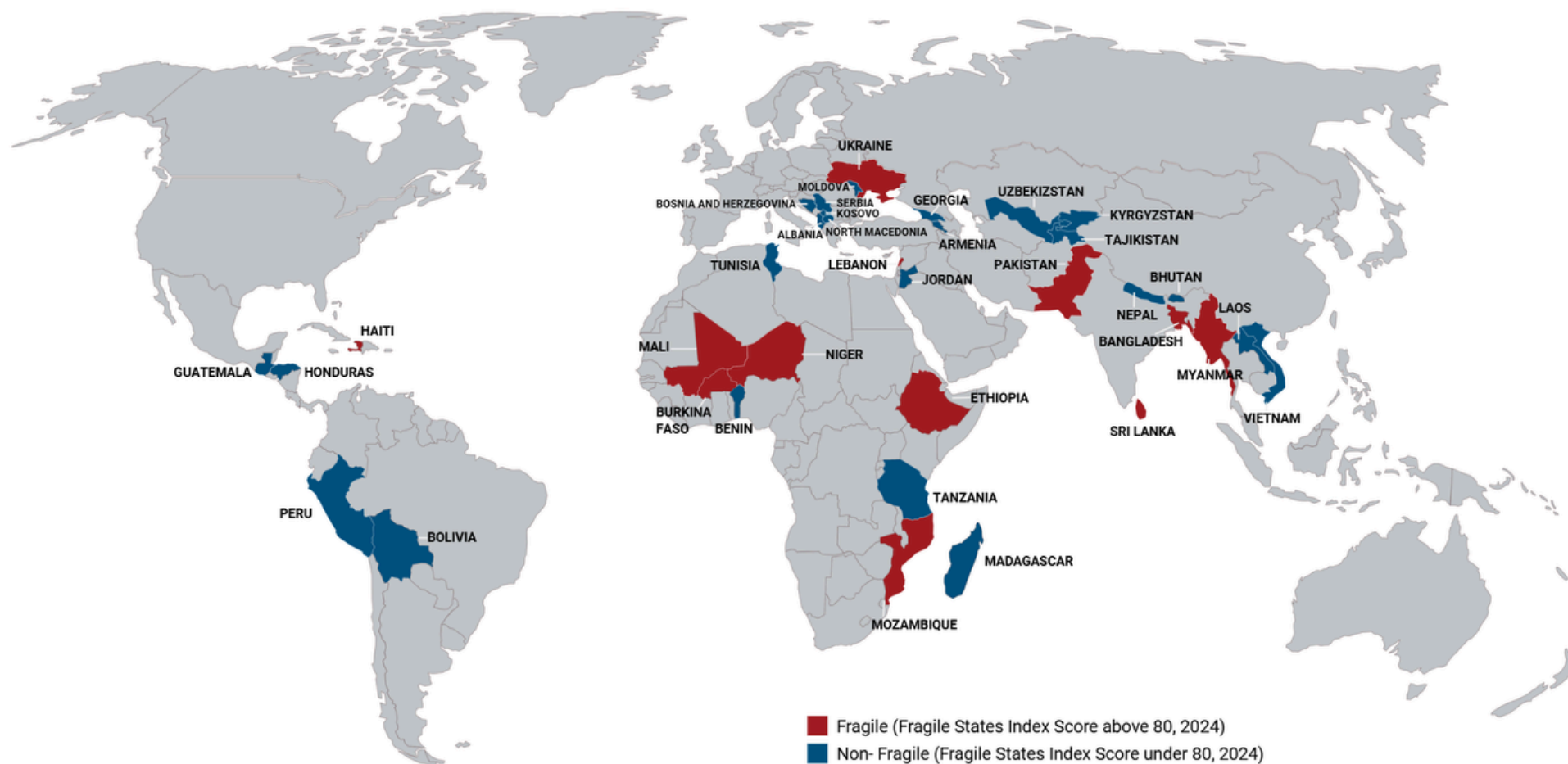
In general, through vocational skills initiatives, 138,067 people in fragile contexts **strengthened their skills, employment opportunities and income prospects**.

53,690 people affected by **migration** in fragile contexts strengthened their ability to **know their rights** and access essential services

331,002 people in fragile contexts experienced improvements in **social cohesion** and participated in initiatives promoting **conflict prevention**.

5.4 million people in fragile contexts benefited from **improved public services through good governance**.

Where We Work: Helvetas Programmes in 2025



Nexus approach: Linking humanitarian, development and peace efforts

In fragile contexts, recurrent shocks and structural vulnerabilities make it essential to better align humanitarian, development and peace efforts. The Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus seeks to overcome the persistent institutional and operational fragmentation between these domains by promoting coordinated, complementary and context-sensitive action. As defined by [Oxfam \(2021\)](#), a nexus approach responds to both immediate and long-term needs of affected populations while enhancing opportunities for peace. This section presents three lessons Helvetas has learned in its efforts to apply a nexus approach.

Lesson 1: Plan for continuity across shocks

In fragile contexts, conditions can change rapidly due to sudden changes in the political, security, social or environmental landscape. Programs therefore cannot be designed around fixed phases or rigid distinctions between humanitarian, development and peace interventions. Instead, they must be able to shift emphasis over time, adapting the configuration of activities as contexts evolve while maintaining continuity of engagement.

Helvetas has found that such shifts in emphasis are easiest when flexibility is planned in from the beginning. While Helvetas maintains its own internal emergency funds to respond quickly to urgent crises, these resources are limited. Mechanisms such as crisis modifiers (essentially pre-agreed budget contingency lines for crisis response) or pre-agreeing to the possibility of budget top-ups or fund re-allocation with the concerned funder(s) are therefore often essential to ensure operational efficiency and continuity. Such mechanisms enable programs to temporarily adjust priorities without abandoning longer-term objectives.

However, donor funding structures continue to shape adaptive capacity. Funding streams remain largely divided between humanitarian and development frameworks. These limitations continue to constrain nexus programming, which requires emergency response, recovery, development and peace objectives to be supported through the same financial and operational systems. Mechanisms such as crisis modifiers, contingency funds and flexible budget lines remain unevenly available and inconsistently used. At the same time, operating in fragile contexts often requires higher investments in security, and financial management, costs that are not always fully recognized or accepted by donors.

Nevertheless, we have seen that greater flexibility is possible when trust and regular, transparent communication are in place. In Myanmar, donors such as UNOPS/LIFT authorized top-ups to long-term agricultural programs to integrate early recovery components following the change of power in the country. In other contexts, donors approved temporary pauses in development activities to allow emergency response, later extending timelines or authorizing reallocations from underspent budget lines. For example, in [Haiti](#) the [REGLEAU project](#) was initially designed to improve sustainable access to drinking water and sanitation. The project was severely affected by the 2021 hurricane. Through close dialogue with the donor (SDC), parts of the intervention were temporarily redirected toward humanitarian response, while maintaining long-term engagement with local institutions and communities. This allowed the project to respond to urgent needs without undermining its development objectives.

Contingency planning enabled a similarly adaptive approach in the [SEGORP project](#) in northern [Ethiopia](#). Shortly after project launch, escalating conflict rendered parts of the implementation area inaccessible. Rather than suspending operations, the project adopted a "stop-and-go" programming approach, activating contingency mechanisms to shift rapidly from development activities to humanitarian response. Activities were adapted to include cash transfers and microgrants for displaced populations, delivered through women-led community-based organizations in IDP settings. As conditions evolved, the project maintained a reduced geographical focus while continuing support in inaccessible areas through flexible financing arrangements. Importantly, capacities built during the humanitarian phase, including business and proposal development skills, translated into longer-term recovery benefits once displacement ended.

Lesson 2: Build nexus engagement on comparative strengths

Few organizations are equally strong across all dimensions of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Helvetas' experience reflects this reality. Historically rooted in development cooperation, Helvetas brings particular strengths to nexus action in fragile settings. Long-term engagement, deep sectoral expertise and sustained partnerships with local institutions and communities provide a foundation upon which interventions can build. These strengths enable short-term responses to be anchored in longer-term processes, ensure continued engagement beyond moments of crisis, and support coherence across humanitarian, development and peace efforts.

At the same time, Helvetas' roots mean its organizational systems and procedures have been historically oriented toward development programming, leading to several recurrent institutional gaps that can constrain our ability to consistently apply a nexus approach. While implementation of the institutional Keeping Fit for Fragility action plan is addressing many of these gaps, the ability of Helvetas teams to apply a nexus approach varies significantly across contexts. Country offices operating in areas that are disaster-prone or affected by conflict have gradually built practical experience with emergency response and peacebuilding, while others have had limited exposure to crisis contexts and developed fewer operational reflexes.

A successful nexus approach therefore means acknowledging our limitations and working in coordination and partnership with others who complement our strengths and weaknesses. For example, in Burkina Faso, Helvetas implements a project in consortium with Acted and the national NGO Tin Tua, combining humanitarian and development expertise to respond to evolving needs. This partnership also enables interventions in areas where Helvetas no longer operates directly due to insecurity, while maintaining support to affected communities through trusted partners with continued access. In Ethiopia (see box), Helvetas has been able to complement its development and humanitarian work by working closely with the Ethiopian Institute of Peace to ensure a peacebuilding perspective is integrated in its work with pastoralist communities in Borana Zone.

Lesson 3: Move beyond “do no harm” to intentional peacebuilding

Although Helvetas increasingly works through a nexus lens, our experience shows that integrating a peacebuilding perspective remains the least understood and the least consistently applied element. Across countries, many teams and staff members already demonstrate strong engagement and awareness on conflict sensitivity. However, including a peacebuilding perspective means going beyond “do no harm” to also intentionally engage with the drivers of conflict and contribute to conflict transformation and social cohesion. There is a need for further awareness-raising and capacity strengthening internally on how to integrate a peacebuilding perspective into programs.

In addition to gaps in knowledge and understanding, professional identities play a limiting role. Staff, teams and projects often define themselves as “development” or “humanitarian” actors, and do not see themselves as peacebuilding actors. This can make the peace dimension feel less central or less clearly owned, even when it is crucial for addressing the root causes of fragility. Yet, in practice, many projects in fragile contexts are already incorporating a peacebuilding perspective, even when this is not always made explicit.

A good example of this implicit peacebuilding can be found in Niger, where water scarcity is a persistent source of conflict, particularly between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers. Through projects such as PHRASEA, Helvetas ensures that the water needs of both farmers and herders are met by constructing livestock watering points that are jointly managed by representatives of both groups. These interventions improve livestock health and reduce competition for limited water resources, one of the main underlying drivers of conflict between herders and farmers. By combining infrastructure development with local governance and social cohesion work, Helvetas has contributed to reducing clashes, particularly during seasonal movements at the beginning and end of the rainy season. Ensuring access to water along transhumance routes has been essential to facilitating pastoral mobility, to easing tensions and enabling peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders.



Bringing together local government officers and traditional authorities to discuss natural resource use is crucial for conflict management. Most attendees are men as they generally occupy positions of authority; nevertheless, the project facilitated women representative's active participation. Photo: Helvetas Ethiopia.

In the southern Borana area of Ethiopia, pastoralism—especially cattle keeping—is central to Borana identity, culture and livelihoods. Livestock and livestock products account for a significant share of Ethiopian pastoralists' income, and the sector defines social, cultural and economic life across the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs). Pastoralists rely on traditionally recognized and communally managed grazing lands, which lack formal legal protection, unlike the certified and demarcated plots available to farmers.

The Borana people are familiar with drought and have longstanding coping mechanisms rooted in community solidarity. However, recent droughts have become more frequent and more severe – droughts that once occurred every 10-15 years now happen multiple times in a decade. Water shortages affect both people and livestock; pasture is shrinking through a combination of land fragmentation, rangeland degradation and reduced carrying capacity, and more households are competing for the same resources. These pressures accelerate natural resource degradation and fuel conflict. Women and children are the first hit and hardest: as men move animals in search of water and forage, women must travel longer distances to meet household needs with fewer milking animals left behind.

Between 2016 and 2020, Helvetas implemented the SDC funded project Sustainable Natural Resource Management for Enhanced Pastoralist Food Security in Borana Zone (NRM Borana), Ethiopia, working across 16 kebeles (the lowest administrative unit). The project centered on participatory natural resource governance, aiming to bridge traditional authorities and local government, while deliberately strengthening women's participation in decision-making. Over five years of implementation, three years were marked by drought, highlighting the need for climate-preparedness from the outset. The project collaborated with other actors in the Borana zone to bring together traditional forecasters and meteorological experts through Participatory Scenario Planning (PSP) to build community-level early warning capacity.

The project began just as a major drought unfolded, requiring rapid adaptation. Disaster Risk Management (DRM) plans were developed at the kebele level, creating locally owned mechanisms to guide humanitarian action even before an official declaration. A contingency fund enabled quick release of resources for emergency measures, including direct cash transfers, locally organized cash-for-work activities, and commercial destocking to preserve livestock value. These interventions aimed to protect development gains while building community resilience for the longer term.



*Yitageng Girma is proud to be a woman member of the Dubluk kebele Peace Committee.
Photo: Helvetas Ethiopia.*

In total, humanitarian responses were activated three times during the project period due to repeated rainfall failures: in 2017–2018, late 2020, and 2021–2022.

NRM-Borana also addressed peace and conflict. The project strengthened local conflict management mechanisms at the kebele level – bringing together traditional leaders, local government officers, and women representatives – and built capacity on conflict-sensitive leadership targeting leaders, officers, and women representatives.

Peace committees were strengthened to mediate disputes, promote non-violent dialogue and act as early warning mechanisms when tensions rise. The approach drew on experiential methods, with participants analyzing real conflicts in their communities and preparing action plans to monitor and address them. Crucially, the project initiated cross-border inter-community dialogues between the Gabra and Borana communities, across the Ethiopia-Kenya border, laying the groundwork for cross-border collaboration and peaceful resource sharing. Engaging customary institutions, women representatives and local authorities was essential for a systemic and sustainable approach to conflict management.

The project's experience with an integrated approach to the humanitarian-development-peace nexus has informed the design of SDC's Regional Livestock Program (RLP), which Helvetas has been implementing since 2023 in consortium with WHH, Mercy Corps, the Ethiopian Institute of Peace and IGAD, working along the Moyale-Nairobi and Moyale-Addis Ababa trade corridors.

Adaptive management: Responding to changes in fragile contexts

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, volatility is the norm rather than the exception. In such settings, adaptive management is a necessary response to uncertainty. Adaptive management refers to the ability to efficiently adjust programs and operations in response to rapidly changing political, security or climatic conditions. In fragile contexts, adaptive capacity is particularly crucial in three areas: program design and management, partnerships, and risk management including conflict sensitivity. Helvetas' experiences suggest three lessons that can help to strengthen adaptation in these areas to ensure interventions remain relevant, effective and safe as contexts evolve.

Lesson 4: Let context drive decisions - within a coherent program framework

Fragile contexts are characterized by political instability, governance constraints, legal uncertainty and rapidly shifting priorities. In such environments, context must be the primary reference point for program decisions. At the same time, effective adaptation requires a clear program vision that provides continuity and coherence over time. Adaptive management in fragile contexts is therefore not about reacting opportunistically to change, but about making deliberate, context-informed choices that allow programs to remain relevant while sustaining long-term engagement.

For Helvetas, a critical enabler of context-driven adaptation has been a shift from project-based management towards more program-level thinking. In fragile contexts, rigid project structures can constrain responsiveness, as each project operates with separate budgets, staff, partners, timelines, and objectives. This fragmentation can slow adaptation.



Project Naafa-PASSAGE training young people in beehive-building techniques. Photo : Helvetas Burkina Faso.

Program-level thinking helps to identify how resources — such as staff time, vehicles or financial allocations — can be reallocated across activities in response to evolving needs and priorities. While the project-based nature of much funding places limits on how flexible we can be, more program-level thinking and operating has helped to maintain coherence across interventions as conditions change.

Key to programmatic thinking is identifying where national or local priorities intersect with areas of long-standing organizational expertise and consolidating engagement in those domains. Helvetas' decades of experience in specific sectors provide credibility, technical depth, and trusted relationships that are particularly valuable in fragile settings. In Burkina Faso, for example, current authorities have identified infrastructure and youth employment as central priorities, both areas in which Helvetas has worked for more than 20 years.

This long-standing alignment has allowed Helvetas to maintain a presence and deepen engagement despite political uncertainty, while continuing to work on issues that remain relevant to communities and are politically feasible.

Alignment is also about communication. Context-driven adaptation requires adapting communication in ways that maintain constructive relationships with authorities while continuing to work in line with organizational principles and donor requirements. This can include highlighting medium- and long-term development interventions while adapting programming to address emerging needs and risks. In some contexts, humanitarian action is not well received, whether due to political sensitivities, past misuse of aid or security concerns.

Governments may equate impartial humanitarian principles with political risks, or communities may be skeptical due to past experiences. In such environments, Helvetas' identity as a long-term development actor, rather than a humanitarian responder, can facilitate acceptance, as approaches framed within a development perspective are sometimes more acceptable and allow engagement to continue.

Importantly, program coherence and alignment with government priorities must not be pursued blindly but should carefully consider questions of government legitimacy. In one case, a donor raised legitimate concerns about continuing a rural roads project in partnership with local authorities amid a context of low political legitimacy. In this case, Helvetas decided that it was important to continue engagement on the basis that the project was engaging with local technical expertise, sectoral experts and institutions that would remain, relevant regardless of political change. However, in other cases, Helvetas has found it necessary to suspend or adapt projects to reduce the risk of giving unwanted legitimacy to certain actors.



Birth certificate distribution ceremony in Bougouni, Mali in December 2025. Through the PROTECT project, Helvetas supports civil documentation and social cohesion across several municipalities in Mali, contributing to the recognition and protection of every child's fundamental rights. Photo: Helvetas Mali.

Lesson 5 : Know what builds acceptance and where your red lines are

In fragile contexts, security management is about preserving the ability to stay engaged over time without normalizing exposure to unacceptable risk. Effective security management seeks to enable continuity of operations while protecting staff, partners and communities. Helvetas' Safety and Security Risk Management Concept is guided by the primacy of life and the principle of precaution. Central to its strategy for managing safety and security management is acceptance.

Key to an acceptance strategy is clarity about the conditions under which that acceptance holds. Acceptance is not static: it is shaped by organizational positioning over time, and perceptions can shift as contexts evolve. While it can never be assumed or guaranteed, Helvetas has found that its acceptance in fragile contexts is often supported by five features. First, its Swiss origin, which helps to avoid polarizing political associations, particularly in West Africa. Second, the absence of a political or religious agenda, reinforcing perceptions of neutrality. Third, long-term engagement with communities, combined with regular dialogue with authorities. Fourth, the fact that over 90% of our country program staff are nationals of the country where they work. Finally, the application of a conflict-sensitive approach focused on identifying and mitigating risks of doing harm, including a strong emphasis on the personal conduct and interpersonal skills of staff.

Despite these efforts, acceptance by all relevant actors cannot always be guaranteed, particularly as contexts deteriorate or fragment. Helvetas teams have therefore realized the importance of defining clear red lines and being prepared to pause, relocate or suspend activities when risks become unacceptable. Helvetas' programs in Burkina Faso and Mali, for example, prioritize accessible or moderately accessible zones where state presence remains and security risks are manageable.

In Haiti, escalating violence around Port-au-Prince forces procurement trips of nearly 200 kilometers to alternative locations, increasing time and costs but maintaining safety and operational continuity. These decisions reflect an understanding that continuity is achieved not by eliminating risk, but through continuous negotiation, active context monitoring, and timely adjustment of operations.



A community meeting to discuss together how to use water from a well in a way that suits everyone. This is important to ensure there are no conflicts between the nomadic herders, whose animals urgently need water, and the settled farming families who want to protect their maize fields. Cooperation works well, particularly because the wells have been appropriately positioned along carefully planned nomadic corridors. Photo: Helvetas Niger

Niger's situation has progressively deteriorated over recent years. The country now faces expanding insecurity along its borders with Mali, Algeria, and Burkina Faso, as well as in border regions with Benin and Nigeria. Armed group activity, banditry in certain regions, and political uncertainty following the 2023 military takeover have reshaped the landscape for development actors.

Following the change of government in 2023, several international partners suspended or significantly reduced their cooperation programs. New administrative measures were introduced, including increased oversight of NGO movements and, in certain cases, the requirement of military escorts for travel outside the capital. At the same time, development funding declined, while humanitarian needs continued to rise, affecting vulnerable households.

Helvetas' experience in Niger, is rooted in long-term engagement and prioritizes acceptance. Over years of collaboration, relationships have been built with local authorities and communities. These relationships are institutional and deeply embedded. Helvetas' acceptance has been indirectly strengthened by the Niger authorities' perception of Switzerland as a neutral and consistent actor. While Switzerland suspended direct financial flows through state systems after the 2023 political transition, it maintained diplomatic engagement and continued supporting communities. This position was positively received by national and local authorities. In a context where many actors withdrew, remaining present while adapting modalities reinforced the image of Swiss actors as reliable partners.

As everywhere, security management in Niger relies on dialogue and continuous context monitoring. Helvetas engages in regular exchanges with regional authorities, civil protection services and humanitarian coordination platforms. These relationships allow the teams to cross-check security information, and to adapt movements based on regularly updated risk assessments.

There is also a certain level of coordination and sharing of information among actors in Niger that allows for jointly planning movements and field missions. Escorts are also required in certain situations.

Overall, the experience in Niger shows how long-term relationships and acceptance function as central pillars of security management. Adaptive approaches grounded in trust, dialogue and continuous contextual analysis allow programs to remain operational while navigating growing fragility in a context of rising humanitarian needs.



Same community meeting. Photo: Helvetas Niger.

Lesson 6: Invest in national and local partnerships to strengthen adaptive capacity

In fragile contexts, nationally or locally-rooted and trust-based partnerships are central to adaptive capacity. Equitable partnerships are a key mechanism for continuity, decision-making, and adjustment when access, security, or political conditions shift. Local or national partners bring contextual knowledge, established community relationships and insight into local power dynamics, all of which support more grounded program design and smoother adaptation. A respectful approach; based on co-creation, co-decision making and Helvetas gradually moving into a facilitation role; strengthens trust and legitimacy. This makes it easier to adapt when circumstances change.

Where partnerships are strong, Helvetas programs have been better able to continue working when security conditions deteriorate. For example, in Myanmar's Gulf of Mottama project, which was developed prior to the 2021 political changes, deteriorating political conditions and selective state engagement required a reduction in geographic scope. Through well-established local partnerships and a project manager who was well embedded, Helvetas continued operating in 43 of the original 60 villages, preserving the program's relevance and value despite the constraints.

While locally-led approaches have been prioritized across all contexts by Helvetas for well over a decade, in fragile settings they become critical for sustaining engagement. In the Sahel, for example, Helvetas has gradually reduced direct implementation in favor of accompaniment, mutual learning and capacity strengthening. Technical functions that were previously delivered by Helvetas staff are increasingly carried out by country-based institutions, community actors and local partners. While this shift predates recent security deterioration, growing access and security constraints have made it more relevant. Locally-led approaches have allowed programs to remain active and to adjust focus as conditions change, while Helvetas continues to assume responsibility for areas such as financial management, accountability and quality assurance in high-risk environments.

Working with partners in fragile contexts requires careful political and conflict-sensitive judgement. Decisions about who to engage with, how partnerships are structured and what risks they entail have direct implications for access, acceptance and program continuity. Identifying trusted local or national actors early and investing in mutual relationships and trust before they are urgently required significantly improves readiness.



Myanmar's Gulf of Mottama Project. Photo: Helvetas Myanmar

In Haiti, for example, the office in Jacmel has built up relationships with potential partners across the sector. This preparatory work enables rapid collaboration when funding becomes available or in case new opportunities or challenges emerge, helping programs remain agile in the context of ongoing instability.

Continued investment in national and local partners is therefore indispensable. Local governmental, civil society and community actors play a central role in sustaining programs' outcomes and driving longer-term structural change. Supporting the continued development of local capacities and leadership is not only a localization objective but a practical means of reducing fragility, enabling programs to remain present, adaptive and relevant over time.

Partners at a glance

In 2025, Helvetas worked with **2,363 local and international partners**, of which 94.5% were local actors.

These included 463 civil society organizations (NGOs, CBOs), 432 private sector partners, and 1,166 public or state entities.

Helvetas' approach to partnerships

At Helvetas, localization is not an empty word; it is embedded in our way of working, and part of our DNA in how we design and implement lasting development interventions. Equitable partnerships are central to Helvetas' systemic approach and are a key mechanism for maintaining continuity and enabling adaptation under changing conditions. See the [Helvetas Position Paper on Partnership and Locally Led Development](#).

Helvetas works through strong collaboration with local and national civil society organizations, as well as private and public partners, community-based actors and national networks that understand the context, relationships, and long-term pathways to change. These actors are often deeply connected to the communities they serve, maintaining trusted relationships with marginalized communities and local government. This national or local anchoring provides critical insight into community dynamics and allows programs to adjust more quickly and remain relevant as conditions evolve.



Mosammat Jesmine Akther Riva Members from Aparajita forum talking in a meeting with local political leaders in Birampur Upazila, Dinajpur on 25 July 2022, Bangladesh. Photo: K M Asad

Historically, partnerships in development often emerged organically, based on immediate project needs or existing relationships. While this flexibility has benefits, it can also lead to inconsistencies in partner engagement, limited investment in capacity strengthening, and missed opportunities for shared learning. In a context marked by recurring shocks, such limitations can weaken adaptive capacity. To address this, Helvetas has invested in building a structured partnership ecosystem, ensuring that collaboration is systematic, equitable, and sustainable.

This includes mutual, structured partner selection processes and joint capacity assessments to develop partnerships together. Helvetas reaches out to organizations already leading sustainable change within their own communities and who are seeking a partner to collaborate in achieving shared goals. By working with partners that demonstrate strong governance, accountability practices and trusted community relationships, Helvetas strengthens its ability to sustain engagement and continuity, even as conditions become more complex.

A key dimension of this approach is investing in local leadership and civil society. Through joint assessments and dialogue, Helvetas and its partners identify priorities for mutual learning, organizational strengthening and long-term collaboration. This may include strengthening financial systems, introducing gender equality and social justice policies, or improving monitoring systems. At the same time, capacity development is a two-way process: Helvetas also learns from partners' expertise and locally-rooted innovations.

Localization also requires that partners are recognized as thought leaders as well as key actors in programme delivery. Helvetas therefore creates opportunities for partners to co-create and co-manage or lead projects as well as for knowledge sharing and advocacy, where appropriate. This may also include organizing dialogue events, contributing to policy discussions and sharing grassroots experience. This helps ensure that programs are informed by those closest to the challenges, while strengthening the role of local actors in shaping responses to uncertainty.

Overall, in contexts characterized by recurrent shocks, locally led development strengthens adaptive capacity and continuity. By investing in intentional design, continuous learning, and by strengthening systems, relationships and local leadership, partnerships enable programs to remain present, flexible and relevant over time.

Agile support: Enabling action in challenging environments

Fragile contexts are characterized by high operational complexity. Financial systems may be disrupted, multiple challenges must be addressed simultaneously, and local infrastructure is often weak or degraded. Sudden changes in registration requirements, legal frameworks or financial regulations can directly affect program continuity. In these environments, program quality and safety depend on an organization's ability to adapt its financial, human resources and operational support systems as conditions change. Often this relies on administrative creativity, flexibility and adaptations that leverage different aspects of the legal framework.

Lesson 7: Design financial systems for disruption and increased costs

Political instability, economic collapse, insecurity or regulatory shifts can increase operating costs, interrupt financial flows and undermine program continuity. Designing financial systems for such environments therefore requires anticipating different forms of financial stress rather than assuming stable conditions.

One recurrent form of disruption Helvetas has faced concerns banking systems and fund transfers. Programs reliant on standard banking channels, rigid funding cycles and fixed budget structures have faced the risk of interrupting operations when financial systems deteriorated.

Helvetas has therefore learned that ensuring continuity requires anticipating such breakdowns and establishing alternative, legal transfer mechanisms in advance. These may include contingency plans to maintain business continuity, organizing advance salary payments, securing fuel reserves, investing in solar energy systems to reduce dependence on fuel supply chains, digitalizing data, and equipping teams with tools such as vehicle-tracking systems and satellite phones. Together, these measures have helped maintain operational continuity when infrastructure, financial systems, or security conditions have deteriorated.



Destroyed residential buildings in East – Ukraine after an attack through the Russian army. Photo: Alyona Budagovska

Engaging effectively in fragile settings also entails recognizing the real costs of fragility. These include higher expenditures related to security management, conflict sensitivity, safeguarding, risk mitigation, human resources and logistics. Beyond these adaptation costs, Helvetas programs in fragile contexts are often navigating economic environments marked by structural constraints, including limited market competition, shortages of key resources, and other factors that can significantly increase operational costs. Acknowledging and anticipating these costs has been essential to ensure that programs remain safe, responsible and effective.

Lesson 8: Invest in people and profiles that can work across the nexus and within fragility

Fragile contexts require staff who can operate across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding modes, work under pressure, and navigate insecurity, political sensitivity and rapid change. The ability to implement nexus-oriented approaches is therefore closely linked to the availability of appropriate profiles. Yet, historically, many Helvetas country teams have been predominantly composed of development professionals, often with limited expertise in humanitarian and peacebuilding programming.

While investments have been made in strengthening the capacities of existing staff, building the right team composition remains a challenge for Helvetas in some fragile contexts. Capacity constraints linked to negotiating access, managing coordination, and conducting rapid assessments can delay action, particularly in the early stages of a crisis. Personal and family circumstances of existing staff can constrain willingness to deploy to insecure environments, although it is important to recognize that, in many crises, staff have made significant personal sacrifices and assumed substantial risks to respond to urgent needs. Helvetas has therefore also been investing in recruiting and developing a broader range of staff profiles.

Recent responses in Myanmar illustrate how these investments are paying off. Following the March 2025 earthquake in Myanmar, an experienced in-country humanitarian team and strong coordination capacity enabled staff to be deployed to the epicentre within 24 hours, making Helvetas one of the first organizations on the ground. The team rapidly assessed feasibility, access, and staffing requirements. At the same time, data collection was integrated into program delivery, allowing early recovery planning to begin during the emergency phase and supporting a timely transition towards reconstruction and livelihood restoration.



Earthquake victims are asked about their most urgent needs. Photo: Ko Ko Oo/Infinity Production Myanmar

Recruiting new staff is not always straightforward. Recruitment dynamics vary significantly across contexts and generate distinct operational constraints. In some settings, such as Niger and Burkina Faso, recent funding cuts by other agencies, including USAID, have released many qualified professionals into the labor market. This has expanded the talent pool but also increased the burden on recruitment processes and costs. High volumes of applications prolong screening and selection, slowing recruitment and program delivery. In Niger and Haiti, this has at times required outsourcing to recruitment firms or reallocating substantial internal resources. In contrast, in contexts, such as Benin, specialized profiles, particularly in security management, humanitarian coordination or senior leadership, remain scarce.

Other contextual factors also present challenges for recruitment. In Haiti, recruitment challenges are compounded by insecurity and emigration. Skilled consultants are largely based in Port-au-Prince and their deployment to Jacmel or remote areas is increasingly difficult. Travel constraints linked to gang violence require alternative routes, such as flying to Les Cayes and arranging onward travel, raising costs and extending timelines. Attracting senior personnel increasingly requires paying a premium, while the pool of locally available expertise continues to shrink. In Mali, new legislation restricts the employment of foreign nationals, requires special permits from central authorities, and increases taxation on non-national staff.

Having the right people is central to managing operational risk and being true to Helvetas' nexus commitments in fragile contexts. Experience has shown that overcoming the challenges involved in developing a broader range of staff profiles is not only possible, but essential.



Helvetas Ethiopia/Franz Thiel

Lesson 9: Tailor infrastructure and logistics to enable continuity

Infrastructure and logistics are decisive for whether programs can continue functioning in fragile contexts. Across several contexts, Helvetas has adapted infrastructure, IT and logistics to be designed to absorb the volatility of fragile contexts.

For example, in Mali, program infrastructure was adapted to the local security context. An internal audit allowed us to identify targeted security measures such as perimeter controls, visitor protocols and improved communication between gatekeepers and security staff. Other options, such as satellite phones, were deliberately not adopted due to cost, limited usability, and concerns from state authorities regarding their use. Whereas in Haiti, satellite phones and satellite-based internet systems provide critical backup communication during major disruptions. In Benin and Mali, all vehicles are equipped with GPS systems that allow continuous tracking during field missions. A logistics officer monitors routes in real time and intervenes if deviations occur. The visibility of branding on offices and vehicles is adapted to the context. While branding is sometimes reduced to limit exposure to risk, in other situations a visible presence can contribute to acceptance and security.

Strong logistics support is equally critical, particularly for humanitarian and crisis-affected actions. In some contexts, such as Niger, logistics systems function relatively smoothly. In others, notably Haiti, insecurity, especially around Port-au-Prince, can disrupt supply chains. Importing vehicles and managing customs clearance has become time-consuming and resource-intensive. This has prompted discussions around centralized procurement contracts managed from headquarters (for example with major suppliers) to reduce delays, control costs, and relieve country teams from heavy administrative burdens. Similarly, reinforcing travel services, including out-of-hours support for flight cancellations or delays, has been identified as a practical requirement in volatile operating contexts.

Overall, these experiences point to the importance that infrastructure and logistics arrangements be deliberately designed for insecurity. These adaptations need to be identified and tailored to each context, to see what works best, and what is most needed.

Haiti : Where agility is indispensable



Project Parer. Photo: Helvetas Haiti

Working in Haiti means operating in a fragile environment where financial and human resources, as well as operational systems, must constantly adapt. Costs are high, and logistics particularly complex.

The country remains highly centralized: a large portion of critical functions (imports, specialized services, technical expertise, institutions, and markets) remain concentrated in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince. While some international flows have been partially redirected to other entry points, notably Cap-Haïtien. This reorganization involves additional costs and heavier logistics to mobilize human and technical resources toward areas of intervention.

Within the country, the movement of people, goods, and expertise continues to be regularly affected by insecurity, restrictions on movement and transport, as well as by the presence of illegal roadblocks set up by armed groups on main transportation routes, which further increases delays, costs, individual risks and operational uncertainty.

Moreover, Haiti is regularly exposed to a combination of natural hazards (hurricanes, floods, droughts, landslides, and earthquakes), the impacts of which are often exacerbated by ecosystem degradation, unplanned urbanization, and the limited capacity of public systems to prevent, anticipate, and respond to crises. In this context, disaster risk reduction does not constitute a one-off intervention but rather a cross-cutting component of all programming.

In the face of these challenges, Helvetas Haiti has continuously invested in security, logistics, procurement, transportation, and communications. This has provided an essential foundation for it to adapt to the rapidly evolving conditions and has enabled it to progressively develop intervention modalities capable of reconciling operational adaptation with a long-term vision. By combining conflict-sensitive approaches, investments in local capacities, and trust-based relationships with institutional and community stakeholders, the organization is not only able to continue its activities in a volatile context, but also to sustainably strengthen the capacity of communities to cope with future crises.

Conclusion



Patrolling illegal fishing in the Gulf of Mottama, Myanmar. Photo: Min Nyan Seik

Lesson 10: Navigate fragility through conscious trade-offs rather than fixed rules

In compiling a wide range of experiences in fragile contexts, we realized that Helvetas' engagement in fragile contexts is shaped by how we navigate three persistent tensions that run through our programs and operations.

Balancing the focus between short term and long-term

In fragile contexts, shocks repeatedly disrupt trajectories of change. Conflict escalation, political shifts or natural disasters often interrupt planned activities and force programs to move quickly into response mode. Linking humanitarian response, development engagement and peacebuilding allows programs to remain relevant across these shifts, preserving development gains while addressing urgent needs and underlying drivers of fragility.

At the same time, working across these dimensions unfolds under uneven conditions. Humanitarian action often requires speed and flexibility, while development and peacebuilding

rely on sustained engagement, institutional relationships and longer time horizons. Funding instruments, implementation timelines and decision-making processes differ across these modes of work and across countries.

In practice, nexus engagement is shaped by how programs adjust their focus as conditions evolve. Teams draw on preparedness measures, scenario planning and clarity around decision thresholds to shift between response, recovery and longer-term engagement. Programs have to redirect resources, adjust roles and reconfigure activities in a way that balances response to immediate needs with their longer-term intended outcomes.

Flexibility and adaptation alongside accountability and compliance

Fragile contexts demand flexibility since plans can be disrupted, access can change, costs increase, and standard implementation modalities may no longer be viable. At the same time, Helvetas remains accountable to donors, partners and affected populations. Fiduciary standards, compliance requirements and internal controls cannot be suspended without consequence.

There is a central tension to be navigated so that adaptation is supported without oversight being weakened. Experience suggests that where systems enable decentralized action within defined safeguards, programs are better positioned to adjust while maintaining institutional integrity.

Continuity of presence, alongside limits of acceptable risk

Maintaining a long-term presence is central to Helvetas' way of working. Continuity supports trust-building with communities, local authorities and service providers, strengthens acceptance and enables sustained engagement over time. In fragile contexts, presence can also be decisive for maintaining access and program relevance, particularly as government legitimacy erodes or institutions weaken.

At the same time, insecurity, political shifts and systemic breakdowns can reach a point where continued presence becomes unsafe or ethically untenable. Acceptance does not eliminate risk, and clear boundaries are required to protect staff, partners and communities. Continuity is therefore not an absolute objective, but one that must be reassessed continuously with staff, partners and communities against evolving security conditions and potential harm. In practice, this balance involves making explicit decisions about when continued presence remains justified and when it does not.

Navigating all three of these tensions, and assuming the trade-offs involved, is an unavoidable part of working in fragile contexts. It is our hope that the lessons and examples discussed in this document offer helpful food for thought for those seeking to navigate this complexity. Many countries where Helvetas works face long-standing fragility and severe disparity, yet remain largely out of the spotlight. As we have demonstrated, working in such contexts is not only feasible, but necessary. It reflects a commitment to work where needs are greatest, even when conditions are uncertain and progress is uneven.

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