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FIT FOR PURPOSE?

AREA-BASED PROGRAMMING IN CONTEMPORARY CRISIS AND DEVELOPMENT RESPONSE

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Amidst increasingly protracted and complex crises and ‘development emergencies’, the operational environment for development agencies like UNDP requires programming approaches that can be applied across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. These approaches must integrate interventions from multiple sectors and be truly locally owned. After decades of use in development practice, area-based programming (ABP) still has the potential to meet these simultaneous needs. This paper explores the unique characteristics of ABP and its applicability to complex development and crisis settings. It further proposes new frontiers of practice moving forward.

Operating in ‘Development Emergencies’

Crisis response and recovery is the dominant modus operandi of international development today. In many countries, the global COVID-19 pandemic compounded existing crises of extended conflict, environmental degradation and social, economic and political instability, creating ‘development emergencies’ requiring solutions beyond humanitarian response.² This ‘new normal’ is already an operational reality for development agencies like UNDP, which delivers more than half of its annual budget in fragile and crisis contexts

and has nine of its ten largest country programmes in such settings.³

Amid these complex crises, the normative frameworks of peace and development are evolving to reflect emerging discourse and programming approaches. First, recognition of increasing uncertainty and the protracted nature of crises have led to a redoubled effort to break down programmatic silos across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus.

Second, complex, fast-changing and territorially differentiated challenges have resulted in rising investments by development actors to explore integrated, multi-stakeholder and portfolio-based alternatives to siloed thematic programming. Third, development programming increasingly takes place in contexts with growing social pressures, including amidst protests, with corresponding demands for greater voice, accountability and more responsive governance systems. There is also an evolving evidence base showing that communities

expect active engagement in the co-creation of development solutions in crisis and conflict-affected settings.⁴ Linked to this, the resurgence of localization discourse highlights the need for highly localized – and locally-led – action for social cohesion and sustainable development. Finally, development programming in increasingly complex transitional and political environments has renewed debates on the need for politically-informed and adaptive programming.⁵

Area-Based Programming: A ‘Go-To’ Approach

Area-based programming, “[targets] specific geographical areas in a country, characterised by a particular complex development challenge, through an integrated, inclusive, participatory and flexible approach”⁶

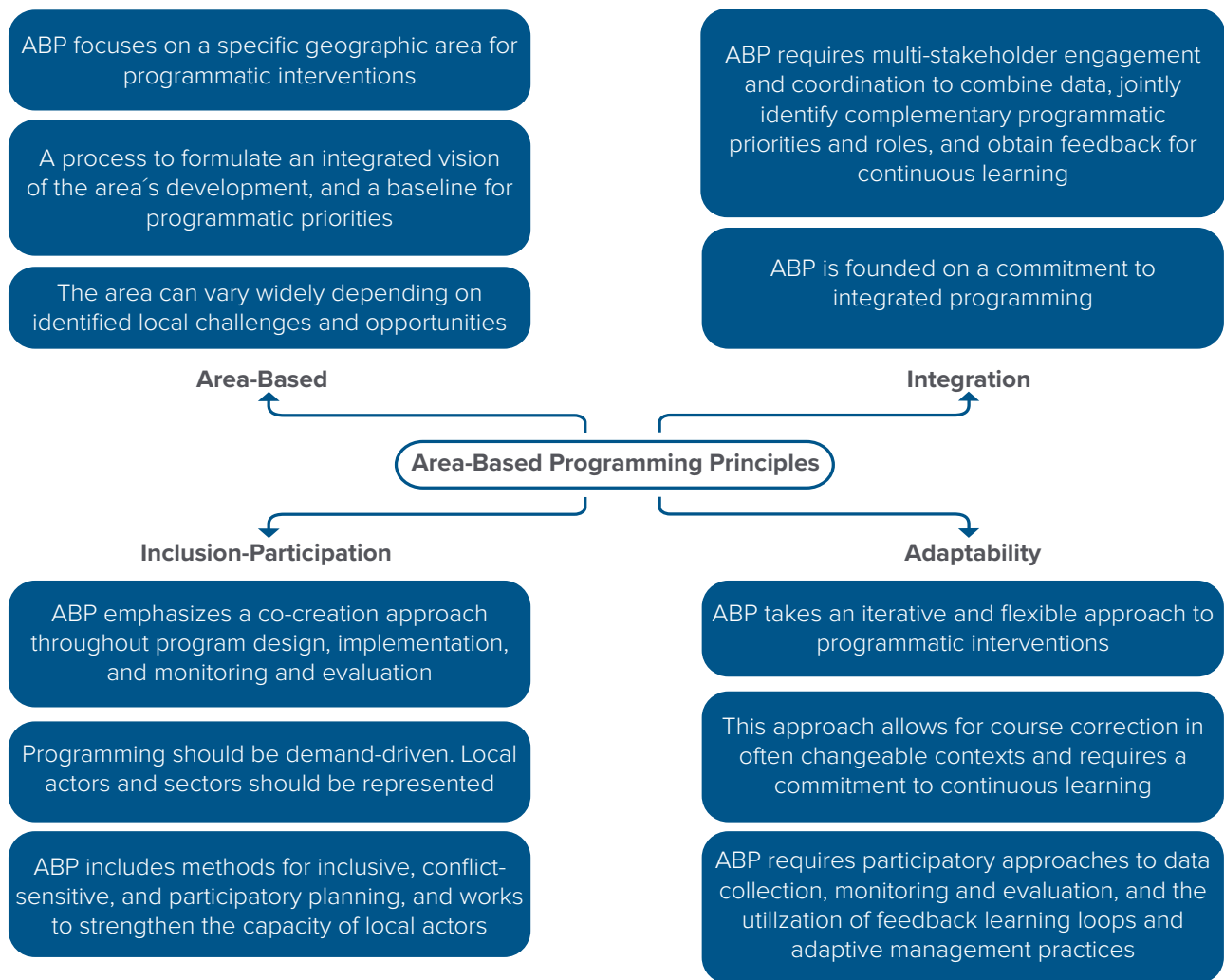
Since 2020, UNDP country operations have seen area-based programming re-emerge as a ‘go-to’ approach that can support the necessary programming in a crisis-affected and complex development landscape. Following the outbreak of armed conflict in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, for example, UNDP launched an area-based stabilization programme to meet the immediate needs of a conflict-affected local population. In two regions of Afghanistan, UNDP runs the Area Based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives to sustain essential services for the Afghan people. In Myanmar, the Rakhine Area-Based Triple Nexus Project brings together humanitarian, development and peace actors to address poverty and protracted displacement in a context of extended fragility.

Beyond these recent crises, a review of UNDP practices and literature over the past two decades⁷ shows the continued applicability of ABP in a wide range of development scenarios, namely: in post-disaster recovery (e.g. UNDP Dominican Republic’s Hurricane Fiona Recovery and Resilience Project); in post-conflict recovery and stabilization (e.g.

UNDP Iraq’s Local Area Development Programme); in regular development programming (e.g. UNDP Uzbekistan’s Area-Based Development Programme in Kashkadarya and Karakalpakstan and UNDP Mozambique’s Decentralization for Development Project); and in situations of protracted crises and fragility (e.g. previous iterations of UNDP Myanmar’s Rakhine Area-Based Triple Nexus Project). (Please see Endnote 7 for further details of methods and cases for review).

A closer look at the principles of ABP (see Figure 1 below) explains why the approach has been – and continues to be – a ‘go to’ method to address complex development challenges. The diagram shows the main principles and subsequent characteristics of ABP. For example, ABP allows different forms of multi-sectoral programming to be structured through *integrated* programming, which can be applied for immediate stabilization as much as for longer-term development and transformative actions that address the root causes of crises.⁸ ABP has proven ideal for scenarios that require recovery efforts to better coordinate a comprehensive, multi-sectoral and integrated approach; for example, in UNDP Ukraine’s 2014-16 Recovery and Peacebuilding Programme, where challenges to regional stability in eastern Ukraine necessitated integration and coordinated implementation of existing projects to efficiently deliver resources to government and civil society organizations.⁹

Figure 1: Principles of Area-Based Programming



For communities and local stakeholders needing to identify local solutions to complex challenges, ABP can enable *inclusive* planning and *participatory* programming for a co-creation process that can be highly responsive to local needs at different stages of crisis, recovery and development. Indeed, UNDP argues that ABP is best when locally-driven, such that local communities and actors identify the priority development issues to be tackled¹⁰ and pinpoint systemic challenges (such as social cohesion or local governance capacity) and empowerment interventions that enable progress towards recovery and development goals. UNDP's experience of ABP in Myanmar has shown that actively strengthening the capacities of civil society, community structures, and women's, youth and minority groups to engage in local planning/development processes often ensures holistic local ownership, accurate targeting, and, therefore, greater sustainability.¹¹

To facilitate participation and integration, ABP actors often establish or build on existing stakeholder platforms to lead the process, including local authorities, communities, local businesses and other relevant formal and informal local governance actors. Such platforms, in turn, ensure that ABP is effective, and more importantly, *adaptable*. Through sustained interaction among involved actors, supported by continuous monitoring, data collection and risk analysis, ABP offers an iterative entry to adaptive programming, which allows for course correction in changeable local contexts.

For continued progress towards larger national development goals, ABP can create a unifying framework for national and local government authorities and development partner projects. In turn, as a platform for the territorial integration of the work of multiple stakeholders, ABP is also appealing in meeting donor requirements regarding value for money.¹² Where area-based interventions

work in synergy, use of financial resources can be optimized by reducing duplications and transaction costs, and thereby, generating greater returns on donor investments. As such, ABP has the potential to optimize the effectiveness of aid.

A review of ABP cases indicates that these core principles and features can result in it being highly

relevant to the emerging norms and practices of actors across the HDP nexus. This includes ABP's ability to facilitate joint analysis, planning, coordination and programming across a range of stakeholders – national and international – at local, subnational and national levels. For this reason, ABP warrants increased attention and dedicated exploration as an essential tool in the HDP 'toolbox'.

Insights from Practice: Lessons Learned for Area-Based Programming

ABP is not an automatic panacea. To realize its potential, lessons from previous programmes indicate that development actors must strengthen the *design*, *implementation* and *sustainability* of ABP. Based on the conducted case study analysis, the following lessons can inform the effectiveness of ABP moving forward.

Design - An impactful ABP design must connect accurate and participatory assessment of local challenges to a sound theory of change, clear objectives and a feasible project scope. Central to this is **detailed situational analysis, including conflict analysis and political economy analysis (PEA)**.¹³ **Intimate knowledge of context, power and conflict dynamics can ensure:**

- **Selection of an appropriate area for ABP**, as was the case in preparatory analysis in the Drina-Tara region of the Western Balkans (a cross border region including areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia), which indicated that ethno-linguistic groupings rather than administrative boundaries may better inform the targeted area.¹⁴ This is particularly important to consider in cross-border ABP. Prior to area selection, consultation with local stakeholders was also found to lead to identification of more appropriate area boundaries.¹⁵
- **Conflict sensitive programming**, which is essential given the extensive use of ABP in fragile and conflict-affected settings. It is imperative that ABP – that works across sectors and stakeholders in strained political environments – does not exacerbate conflict dynamics and prevents future conflict.
- **Better diagnosis of the challenges to be addressed**. Identifying the correct set of interrelated problems to tackle and the correct range of associated sectoral interventions is key for a feasible project scope and scale, which was found to be an important factor for success.

Several additional considerations in ABP design appear to improve its effectiveness. From a project scope perspective, reviewed cases highlight that **the multi-sectoral focus of an area-based project should be appropriate to the context and should have strong synergies**.¹⁶ On scale, **ABP should be proportional to the size of the targeted area**, as small-scale interventions in a large target area will likely result in limited impact.¹⁷

Finally, findings reveal the **primacy of politics** in ABP, as politics impact everything from area selection to stakeholder identification and engagement. Despite attempts at neutrality by UNDP and partners, programming choices have tangible impacts on who participates, which issues are tabled, which priorities are acted upon, and, ultimately, who benefits.¹⁸ Those delivering ABP should draw on stakeholder mapping, conflict analysis and PEA and reflect on the political context and impact of the programme throughout the project cycle.

Implementation - As a development and recovery approach, ABP faces several unique implementation opportunities and challenges that require intentional programming approaches to overcome:

- The coordination of a multisectoral programme is often a significant hurdle, as it involves partners ranging from relevant ministries to non-state actors including civil society groups, the private sector and other UN agencies.¹⁹ Setting up and implementing **ABP is a resource-intensive exercise which requires time, resources for coordination, early consultation and ongoing participatory processes with multiple stakeholders**. While this can be undertaken relatively quickly and effectively, it can still be deemed slow by humanitarian standards.²⁰

- While the consolidation of existing projects by implementing agencies into a single ABP can support quick mobilization of a project, it can also lead to inconsistencies in project delivery and missed opportunities for synergies and improved results.²¹ This is particularly the case when a central project management body for ABP is not established, when management and information systems are not unified or when different donors and funding modalities are not integrated for operational purposes and monitoring and reporting.²² Merging existing projects is also found to require complex coordination and engagement processes with national counterparts.²³ Where feasible, it is clear that **ABP should be developed from scratch** and that **coordinated operational/funding mechanisms, such as basket funds and trust funds, should be utilized to facilitate joint programming.**
- **ABP needs to be properly linked to regional and national level recovery or development frameworks** to achieve effective coordination and sustainability of results. In the case of cross-border programming, different national frameworks and policy environments can lead to additional coordination issues, which must be overcome.²⁴ Further, the selection of one geographical area for ABP can increase disparity between this and neighbouring areas, or even neighbourhoods, in the case of urban ABP. **Acknowledging unintended consequences** can ensure use of methods that specifically address development disparities between adjacent target and non-target areas.²⁵ That said, if carefully managed, exemplary ABP can foster uptake of the approach in other areas.
- One of the main factors of success for ABP is the ownership of the process by both local communities (including women's, youth and other potentially marginalized social groups, as well as traditional and non-state actors) and institutional actors.²⁶ This is, in turn, dependent on investing in **enabling spaces for dialogue, inclusive assessment and planning, and building trust and communication mechanisms** with community members and institutional actors from the outset, so that they can see the effects of their participation and raise concerns if their needs are not met.²⁷
- **Local capacities and frameworks** to ensure further planning and management of development and peace initiatives. Local capacity development – trainings, skills and systems development, peer learning – appears essential for local planning and governance systems to maintain and build on the gains of ABP.²⁸ This must include formal local authorities and governments, informal governance mechanisms and civil society organizations. Local institutional capacities have also proven vital for sustaining peace, for example, through support to local government to implement victim reparation schemes or to enhance community capacities to participate in local and national peace dialogues.²⁹
- **Exploring and establishing financial mechanisms for future funding**, whether from donors or through local resource mobilization, such as community service fees.³⁰
- **Ownership, by local decision-makers, official authorities and society.** Sustainability of results can depend on local social acceptance of the outcomes of ABP. The use of needs assessments, public awareness-raising and facilitating regular feedback loops are an important part of ensuring this.³¹
- **Sufficient links (vertical, horizontal and/or cross-border) with broader development plans.** As discussed above, sustainability also depends on cultivating proper links with wider development strategies for the area, so that interventions coordinate with multi-level programmes and policies and do not miss opportunities to harmonize standards or scale.³² If this does not occur, there can be “significant disconnect between strategic plans and programmatic activities at different spatial scales (for example between district, subdistrict and city-wide) reducing the efficiency and long-term sustainability of each”.³³ Communication of results with political and policy actors at the regional or national level is also essential to ensure vertical coherence and scaling. Case analysis demonstrates that lack of engagement leaves little influence or space for discussions on scaling ABP once it is nearing completion.³⁴
- **A continuous and robust evidence base** for monitoring and communicating results for wider policy engagement and, later, for scaling interventions. This, in turn, requires data gathering and analytical capacities for both programme staff and local actors.³⁵

Sustainability - Sustaining (and where relevant, scaling) the results of an ABP is dependent on the following factors:

Conclusion

In the current context of ‘development emergencies’, the lessons of previous and current practices demonstrate that ABP can provide a vital framework in which actors from across the humanitarian, development and peace domains interact to undertake programmes that address both short-term humanitarian needs and long-term recovery, development and peacebuilding goals. At the heart of this approach – and very much central to its success – is the need to ensure that ABP focuses on an appropriately defined area and a continuously informed understanding of context. It requires sufficient and committed resources and must deliver truly integrated programming across sectors and stakeholders. In addition, ABP must be inclusive and participatory, utilizing and investing in local capabilities and ownership; and react to risks and changing needs to deliver flexibility and responsiveness in programming. These factors are the definitive value of ABP as an effective approach to ‘stay and deliver’.

If, in practice, ABP can truly adhere to its core principles, and if the programming hurdles of design, implementation and sustainability can be overcome, then ABP promises to deliver effective interventions in contemporary crises and development settings alike.

To realize the theory of change above, UNDP and partners must actively and jointly commit to overcoming the identified constraints. ABP is resource- and time-intensive. Establishing ABP requires committed coordination and partnership between implementing agencies and adequate investments (of time and resources) by all parties. If programming and funding structures remain siloed; if the focus is not sufficiently localized, multi-sectoral, proportionately sized and adequately funded; and if ABP is not sufficiently linked to territorial and national planning (and in some cases, cross-border dynamics), we cannot expect to see

the development impact and maximization of donor investments, which ABP has the potential to deliver.

To build a solid foundation for impactful ABP in the current context requires committed UN system-wide partnerships. The ability to draw on the expertise and advantages of different UN agencies and to achieve integration (including across the HDP nexus) depends on strong UN country team coordination mechanisms. This would allow ABP to facilitate joint and consistent programme design, resource mobilization, implementation and monitoring. This cohesion is, in turn, enabled by longer term commitments to joint local action, such as the ambitions articulated in the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework or the National Recovery Plan.

Further, steps should be taken to leverage current development enablers, such as digitalization, strategic innovation and innovative development financing, to maximize the design, implementation and sustainability of ABP. Initiatives that utilize crowdsourced data, big data and AI for analysis and data-based programming, or accessible digitalization, such as mobile money and digital platforms for open governance can do much to strengthen ABP. The application of enablers to boost the impact of ABP is an emerging area that demands further exploration to enhance the approach.

In a climate of constant change and uncertainty aggravated by conflicts, socio-economic collapse, climate change and pandemics, there is a need for continuous fine-tuning of ABP to ensure it is adequately designed, politically and risk-informed and adaptive programmatically and operationally. Moving forward, this is what UNDP and partners must do – invest in the knowledge-gathering, expertise, data and innovations necessary to ensure the vast potential of ABP is realized for the people who need it most.

Endnotes

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- 5 These debates, grounded in the discourse of 'thinking and working politically', demonstrate that development is not solely a technical process, but one that is deeply political. As such, improved political economy analysis, responsiveness to change and adaptive management practices are critical in achieving successful developmental outcomes.
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