



Mebrate Ayalew and Debessaw Chehole, participants in a Helvetas climate adaptation project in Ethiopia. © Helvetas/PatrickRohr

KEEPING FIT FOR FRAGILITY

Close to half of Helvetas' partner countries can be classified as fragile. It is imperative that we remain engaged in fragile states if we are to be true to the principle of Leave No One Behind. Helvetas must therefore remain fit for fragility, able to operate effectively, responsibly, and safely in fragile contexts.

HELVETAS AND FRAGILITY

Fragile contexts are places that are exposed to risks such as conflict, natural disasters and economic crises, and where the state and other institutions are weak and unable to adequately respond.

Our position paper [Fragility: Development Cooperation in Fragile Contexts](#) sets out our understanding of fragility and our preconditions and principles for engagement in fragile contexts. This action plan builds on the position paper to outline a framework and vision of what it means to be "fit for fragility" and then details the measures we are taking to achieve this vision.

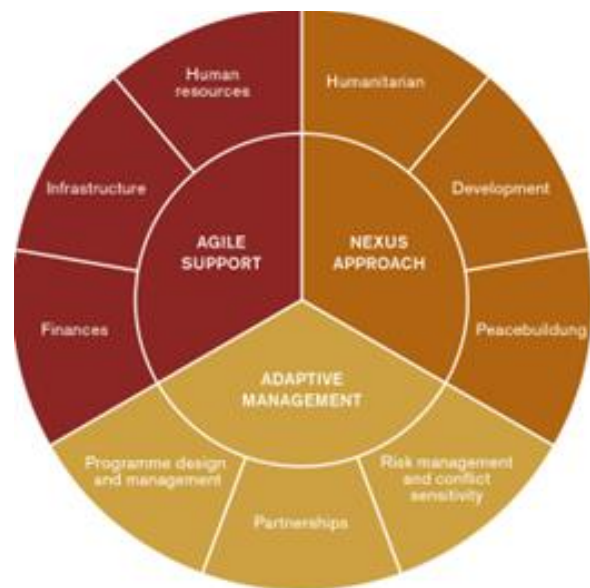
Our goal is that by the end of 2028, we are fully fit for fragility, working holistically to meet humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding objectives. Our programme design and management are context-responsive and adaptive, working to strengthen local partners, manage risks and be fully conflict sensitive.

To reach this goal we have developed a framework to articulate our vision of what it means to be fit for fragility. It consists of three pillars, each with three inter-linked domains:

- a humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus approach
- adaptive management
- agile support

OUR VISION OF A NEXUS APPROACH

We recognize that humanitarian response, development and peacebuilding goals often overlap and that an integrated approach is necessary. Our programming in fragile contexts is situated either within the **double nexus** of humanitarian and development work or within the **triple nexus** of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. This requires strong internal and external co-ordination to ensure different approaches and actions work in a complementary manner towards a common purpose.



Fit for Fragility Framework

OUR VISION OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

We aim to apply a context-responsive, adaptive approach to three key domains: programme design and management, partnerships, and security management and conflict sensitivity.

Programme design & management

We recognize the complexity and uniqueness of each fragile context. We differentiate between contexts that are chronically fragile and those experiencing temporary crises. We conduct comprehensive, holistic **analysis** to identify the drivers of fragility at local, national, regional and global levels, and to identify possible future scenarios. We apply **adaptive management**, adapting to evolutions in the context while keeping our long term strategy in mind. Adaptations are based on quick and continual **learning** that informs adjustments in programming and funding. We have the culture and systems in place that enable us to be flexible and agile so that we can quickly respond to changing conditions prominent in volatile contexts.

Partnerships

We take into account that who we partner with, and how, is different in fragile contexts, and that some criteria for engaging in partnerships may have to be added or looked into in more detail (e.g. an organization's history, its political positioning, their relations with stakeholders involved in the conflicts etc.). Where formal institutions are weak, our partnerships with informal actors and civil society take on increasing importance. Based on relationships of mutual respect, we listen carefully to partners and, where relevant, we focus on supporting their organizational development. We critically reflect with our partners, both in the framework of our bilateral partnerships and broader alliances such as Alliance 2015, to learn and improve our ways of working together. Where security conditions make it difficult for us to operate, better-positioned partners (i.e. those who face a smaller security risk) sometimes take on a greater responsibilities and, in some cases, we may work exclusively through partners. Do no harm concerns of unwanted legitimization and substitution effects are carefully considered and partners are strengthened.

Security management & conflict sensitivity

Security management and conflict sensitivity are accorded top priority when operating in contexts with increased exposure to risks and weak capacities to respond to those risks. Our duty of care towards staff, partners and primary stakeholders makes safety and security risk management of fundamental importance, and explicit discussions about risk and red lines are conducted with staff and partners. By integrating conflict sensitivity, we not only aim to avoid doing harm, but also to have a deescalating impact on conflict dynamics where possible. This increases our acceptance and improves our collaboration with local actors. Moreover, conflict management competence and mediative communication skills and attitudes, increase the safety and security of our staff and programmes.



Helvetas staff in a conflict sensitivity and security management workshop, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, October 2022. Credit: Helvetas/Owen Frazer

OUR VISION OF AGILE SUPPORT

Three key domains are crucial to supporting Helvetas' ability to deliver effective programming in fragile contexts: human resources, infrastructure (physical and digital), and finances. In all domains internal procedures and decision-making need to be more agile than when working in more stable contexts.

Human resources

Managers are supported to recruit people with a strong capacity for analysis, management of challenging situations (trained in non-violent communication and other conflict management approaches), disposing of blended humanitarian/development profiles, who collaborate well with others, are adaptable, work well under pressure, and are willing to accept a certain level of personal risk. To ensure sufficient people with the necessary competences, we offer attractive staff remuneration, benefits-packages and working conditions to remain competitive in contexts where there is often a limited supply of, and a high demand for, well-qualified people.

We provide training and coaching to strengthen staff capacities in areas crucial to operating effectively in fragile contexts (analysis and adaptive programme management, team management, security and risk management, conflict sensitivity, conflict management, psychosocial support, gender and social equity integration, and climate and disaster risk reduction).

We have strong management teams that include experienced programme directors supported by programme advisors, security managers, human resource managers, monitoring, evaluation and learning co-ordinators, and conflict sensitivity focal points. Our teams represent the diversity of the contexts we work in, in gender, language, ethnicity and more.

Additional advisory support is provided where needed by our advisory services because in fragile contexts everything is more complex, takes longer and more investment is needed in staff and partner capacity-development and support.

An organisational level "surge" capacity is in place to respond to emerging crises without undermining the effectiveness of longer-term programmes. Helvetas provides a psychologically-supportive environment with collective spaces for exchanging and processing difficult experiences and provides individual mental health support as necessary.

Infrastructure

Physical and digital infrastructure is in place to meet the requirements of operating in fragile contexts, despite limited supply and high demand often resulting in high costs. The necessary investments are made in **logistics** to take account of security measures and weak transport infrastructure (e.g. requirements for more robust vehicles, more air travel, fewer service providers). Where required, **physical infrastructure** is upgraded to meet security and functionality requirements, considering also gender differentiated needs.

IT plays a pivotal role in ensuring operational continuity. A combination of remote accessibility, data security, and infrastructure resilience help to address the challenges of IT in such contexts. Robust online data accessibility is essential for situations where physical access to offices may be restricted for security reasons. This involves implementing secure cloud-based storage solutions, that are backed-up regularly. A strong focus on cybersecurity is imperative to safeguard sensitive information from potential threats. The ability to deploy and maintain IT infrastructure with minimal local dependencies, such as power and connectivity, is vital to adapt to the unpredictable conditions. Special attention is dedicated to the protection of sensitive, personal data. Given the security situations, strict data privacy and security protocols is paramount to mitigate risks associated with handling large data volumes.

Finances

Financing and funding are central to the success of operations in fragile contexts. Helvetas regularly **communicates** to donors and the public about the why, what and how of working in fragile contexts in order to maintain funding for our work in these contexts with a long-term perspective. For these funds to be used effectively, quick response and flexibility and adaptation of operations are key. **Financial management processes** are kept as light as possible to support this way of working while sufficient checks and balances are maintained to promote transparency, accountability and mitigate potential for abuse.

ASSESSMENT AND ACTION PLAN

For each pillar in the fit for fragility framework, we have assessed our level of fitness against our vision and planned further actions to ensure that we achieve it.

Nexus approach

With experience and expertise in all three domains of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding, Helvetas is well-positioned to operate within the triple nexus. In addition to various initiatives currently underway to strengthen each of these three domains, the following further actions are planned to ensure a true nexus approach:

- Producing a lessons learned study of our nexus experiences so far to develop nexus guidance and to share our experiences with partners and development actors
- Including a psychosocial dimension in our peacebuilding work
- Linking our conflict and climate work, applying a GSE lens
- Strengthening the inclusion of conflict transformation components in our projects.

Adaptive management

Programme design and management

Helvetas has many tools for analysis and programme design, and systems thinking and working is a declared institutional approach. However, there is a lack of a standardized general guidance on analysis, programme design, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and orientation on how various existing tools and approaches are linked. Several recently launched initiatives will help to strengthen the quality, rigour and adaptability of our programme design and management including a MEAL manual, a digital programme management platform, a joint systems-thinking analysis tool and additional management support positions in the international programmes department. Further actions that are planned to ensure we can achieve our vision include:

- Investing in roll-out of new tools and guidance on programme design and management
- Revising existing project and programme management checklists to ensure they include risks related to fragility
- Reviewing decision-making processes at head office to make them more agile

Partnerships

Helvetas has a long of experience of working with partners and well-established policies, guidelines and tools. Partnership and localization is a strategic topic for 2025-2028 with the goal of more equal and strategic partnerships where Helvetas shifts towards a position of Helvetas as a Swiss partner in a connected global civil society. This direction aligns well with the vision of working with partners in fragile contexts. To ensure that the specificities of fragile contexts are taken into account we plan to also:

- Develop a duty of care policy for partners
- Collect the lessons learned of our experiences of working remotely through partners

Security management and conflict sensitivity

Via the country risk assessment tool Helvetas regularly monitors five areas of risk. Current initiatives underway will help to further strengthen our risk management, notably in the area of financial risks, risks of doing harm, and around breaches of laws and regulations.

The management of safety and security risks is supported by a security concept and guidelines, a security co-ordinator in Switzerland, and safety and security advisors in most, but not all, fragile partner countries. The following actions will help to optimize our risk management:

- Integrating a standardized risk management tool/check-list into the MEAL manual
- Strengthening monitoring and follow-up of programme-level risk mitigation measures
- Reinforcing advisory support to security management in countries
- Ensuring safety and security advisors in all high risk contexts, considering gendered differences.
- Prioritizing integration of risk management in the new digital programme management platform.

Agile support

Human resources

Helvetas has a strong organizational culture with a committed staff that identify strongly with the organization's values. Several current initiatives will further strengthen the competence of Helvetas staff and its ability to retain and attract quality people. These include the global HR initiative, the global leadership programme, and the participatory review of the remuneration systems for Swiss and international staff.

As Helvetas has expanded its emergency response activities, hiring modalities have been reviewed to make them more efficient for recruiting for emergency response. Our surge capacity for humanitarian response is being built up by recruiting additional staff with roving functions in the Humanitarian Preparedness & Response team and the Finance team. As Helvetas finds itself operating in several complex environments, three important further actions are planned:

- Specifying the minimum competences and staff capacities for adaptive programming and developing a strategy to ensure they are in place.
- Establishing a low-cost, light roster for emergency response
- Elaborating a concept for psychosocial support for staff working in challenging contexts

Infrastructure

The current digital transformation workstream should help to ensure that Helvetas' digital infrastructure is fit for purpose. Two specific actions that are relevant for all contexts and particularly important in fragile contexts where digital solutions are part of a strategy of overcoming the challenges in these contexts:

- Supporting countries to invest in internet connectivity in offices (and for partners).
- Co-ordinating and standardizing IT security

Finances

Helvetas has solid internal financial processes. The current initiative to strengthen the internal control system will help to strengthen the management of financial risks. However, this will have to be balanced against the need for flexibility and agility in fragile contexts. The planned recruitment of a new humanitarian finance expert should help to find that balance.

Some traditional donors are hesitant about investing in fragile contexts and donors funding calls are not always directed towards the causes of fragility. Ensuring the availability of the funds required to operate effectively in fragile contexts requires the following additional actions:

- A budgeting template for fragile contexts so that project proposals include budget lines for necessary resources
- Reviewing the agility of administrative and procurement processes.
- Reviewing allocation of central funds to programme development to take account of degree of fragility (strategy fund)
- Establishing contingency funds for investing in rapidly deteriorating contexts.
- More communication and advocacy on our work in fragile contexts and the causes and impacts of fragility in order to reassure donors and ensure funding is directed where it is needed.

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