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Spotlight on Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus Implementation in Iraq

Challenges to Peace Activities from a Decolonial Perspective

Emergence of HDP in Iraq as a UN-driven, top-down approach.

Localisation must mean prioritising the knowledge, needs and capacities of Iraqi actors and communities.

Peacebuilding is not apolitical: Whose visions for peace count?

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Introduction

This Spotlight on Iraq is part of a larger study on the implementation of the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus approach, which aims to make humanitarian and development interventions more sustainable in conflict-affected and fragile contexts and to combine them with a peacebuilding component. Focussing on a decolonial perspective, the Spotlight highlights the specific context of how the HDP nexus was designed and implemented in Iraq.

Our Discussion Paper (Müller-Koné et al., 2024) uses a decolonial perspective to assess how the HDP nexus is implemented, focussing in particular on Mali, Iraq, and South Sudan. This decolonial perspective draws attention to power imbalances and structural racism that can be traced back to the colonial era and that continue to permeate the international humanitarian system, most visible in the dominance of international (non-)governmental organisations that shape the aid structure (Aloudat & Khan, 2022; Schirch, 2022). This dominance is particularly relevant for the HDP nexus: The HDP nexus debate emerged around the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit as part of the "New Way of Working", which aimed to better integrate 'local' governmental and non-governmental aid actors into the humanitarian system. Through joint analysis and direct access to funding for these local actors, international aid organisations are to work towards 'collective outcomes' and 'localisation' in a bottom-up approach. In contrast to this, we argue in our main study that the way the HDP nexus is currently implemented fails to address the power asymmetries and structural inequalities in the international aid system that lie behind abstract concepts such as localisation and collective outcomes (Müller-Koné et al. 2024).

We call for a decolonial rethinking that analyses and acknowledges how colonial legacies affect funding flows, the distribution of staff and decision-making power, as well as norms and attitudes within the aid sector.

Beyond a bottom-up approach, we call for a decolonial rethinking that analyses and acknowledges how colonial legacies affect funding flows, the distribution of staff and decision-making power, as well as norms and attitudes within the aid sector. A decolonial approach prioritises the needs and visions of local populations as a "more holistic approach to supporting genuinely locally owned civil society efforts" (Mathews, 2022), more equitable "local led" or "community led" partnerships (Doan & Fifield, 2020; Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson, 2023, pp. 23–24) while recognising that 'the local' is a space of diverse and competing actors (Schirch, 2022, p. 17). The question guiding the overall study is: **How can the HDP nexus be implemented from the bottom up from a decolonial perspective?**

The first finding of this Paper is that the HDP approach in Iraq was implemented as a UN-driven, top-down approach: The participation of local NGOs and communities in the relevant decision-making and implementation processes is severely limited throughout Iraq. At the same time, the impact of UN agencies's assistance on conflict dynamics is hardly measured, and the accountability of UN organisations to the people they serve is correspondingly low. Second, expectations by donors and policy makers regarding standards to be met are unevenly applied to local, i.e. non-governmental Iraqi NGOs and international NGOs. This reflects substantial power imbalances and structural racism, which manifests itself in

\ aid funding that strongly limits access for Iraqi NGOs—four per cent of funding in 2021;
\ differing perceptions of 'expertise' and valid knowledge regarding international and Iraqi staff;
\ differing standards for which actors should (or should not) explain how they deal with corruption;
\ differing criteria (or the lack thereof) of accountability.

This reveals different expectations towards UN agencies and international versus local NGOs in terms of capacity, expertise and propensity to corruption, which preemptively absolve international organisations of possible wrongdoing but imply a lack of capacity, will or values on the part of local NGOs and Iraqi staff. Third, peacebuilding is presented in HDP documents in an apolitical manner although this misrepresents reality:

The political context of aid in Iraq is highly polarised, and the space for aid activities is shrinking, for example due to interference by the government and armed actors who claim a say in what activities can be carried out. Peacebuilding is, therefore, perceived as highly sensitive.

Still, key UN and OECD DAC guidance documents portray the HDP nexus as if it were an apolitical concept that simply allows for a smoother combination of humanitarian aid, development assistance and peacebuilding, hiding political power relations.

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Given these key findings, a decolonial perspective invites us to ask to what extent these fundamental decisions can be reached in a way that prioritises the knowledge, needs and capacities of Iraqi organisations and communities, including the spheres of policy design, UN and (I)NGO project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. A decolonial perspective also raises the question of how comparable expectations or standards of accountability can be applied to all UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs, including their staff.

Throughout the Paper, we highlight how a decolonial perspective helps us to understand why the implementation of the HDP approach has so far largely failed to be bottom-up, and what questions a decolonial perspective brings to the fore that need to be addressed to work towards constructive change.

After outlining the methodology that underpins this Paper and our research in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan (cf. Haidara, 2024; Kemmerling 2024), the third section provides an overview of how the HDP was introduced by the United Nations in Iraq in 2017, the social, economic and political context in Iraq, and the main framework documents on the HDP nexus for Iraq. I then critically discuss the United Nations' and other NGOs' implementation of the HDP approach. Finally, the Conclusion highlights the main findings of this Paper and raises questions about how the HDP approach could be implemented in Iraq from a decolonial perspective. As a guiding question, I ask: How has the HDP been implemented in Iraq, and to what extent does a decolonial perspective open up new ways forward?

Methodology

The findings presented here are based on a systematic literature review triangulated with semi-structured interviews with local and international NGO staff and community members in Iraq South Sudan in 2022 and 2023. For this study, the localities are Sinjar, Tal Afar and Mosul. In parallel, we applied the same methodology in South Sudan and Iraq. This Spotlight Paper is part of the research project "How can the HDP succeed? NGOs between Humanitarian Aid, Development Assistance and Peacebuilding" (2021–2024), funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). While we are cooperating with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) in the conceptualisation and implementation of this project, the BICC research team remains independent.

This Spotlight Paper is based on 80 interviews with (I)NGO staff and residents of different social strata.

For Iraq, this collaboration came to an end in 2023 when the Iraqi Department of Non-Governmental Organizations (DNGO) did not grant permission to conduct interviews in federal Iraq. As a result, I held interviews online and by meeting interviewees in person in Erbil and Dohuk across the internal Iraqi border between central Iraq and the Kurdish Region.

The BICC project team conducted around 60 interviews with (I)NGO staff operating in the three countries and about 120 interviews with residents from differing social strata, age groups, ethnicity and language groups, religious beliefs, and with a particular consideration for gender in the three localities. The Spotlight Paper on Iraq is based on 80 interviews with (I)NGO staff and residents of different social strata. To ensure the safety and security of interviewed local individuals and the staff of INGOs and cooperating national or local NGOs, all interview data has been anonymised and is not shared with the partners, the funder or otherwise outside the research team. We have adopted a decolonial methodology by centring on local knowledge in our research, by regularly discussing self-critical reflexivity within our team; by working in tandem with local researchers and assistants where possible; by working in a culturally sensitive manner; and by emphasising that participation in this research is voluntary and that interviewees can withdraw from the project at any time. In addition, all research findings are shared with interviewees bilaterally on a regular basis to the extent possible. I worked with Hana Ghaeb Qader as the research assistant for Iraq.

**Table 1: Overview on HDP nexus implementation in Iraq**

Origins of the HDP nexus	EU Pilot in 2017
Current phase	Humanitarian aid phasing out
Key UN documents on HDP nexus for Iraq	2020 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2021+ 2022 Common Country Analysis (CCA) Annual Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) until 2023
Key government of Iraq-documents on HDP	2021 Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework
Implementation of the HDP nexus by the UN	Top-down Coordination lacking across agencies and (I)NGOs; local NGOs have limited role; short-term funding only; government is not perceived as a reliable partner by (I)NGO staff according to reviews.
Implementation of the HDP nexus by organisations other than the UN	Limited Peacebuilding activities in particular often raise objections by armed and political actors.

The Need for Accountability and Measuring the Impact of Aid on Conflict Dynamics

Iraq was one of the first six countries in which the European Union piloted the HDP approach in 2017 alongside Chad, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan and Uganda (cf. Müller-Koné et al., 2024, p.14).[1] The request to implement aid programmes in Iraq in line with the HDP nexus did not come from the Iraqi government, local NGOs or wider communities: Instead, it was initiated by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations. De facto, the implementation of the HDP nexus in Iraq did not begin until late 2019 after the COVID-19 crisis had erupted in the country (VOICE, 2019). By 2022, it was still in its early stages (International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), 2022, p. 5). In total, Iraq received nearly US $23 billion in multilateral and bilateral aid between 2011 and 2021 with a strong focus on the humanitarian sector, peaking between 2014 and 2017. Meanwhile, development funding has overtaken peacebuilding funding (see Figure 1).

> **Programmes in line with the HDP nexus ... were requested by the EU rather than by the Iraqi government, local NGOs or wider communities.**

Figure 1: Financial flows of ODA to Iraq (2011–2021)
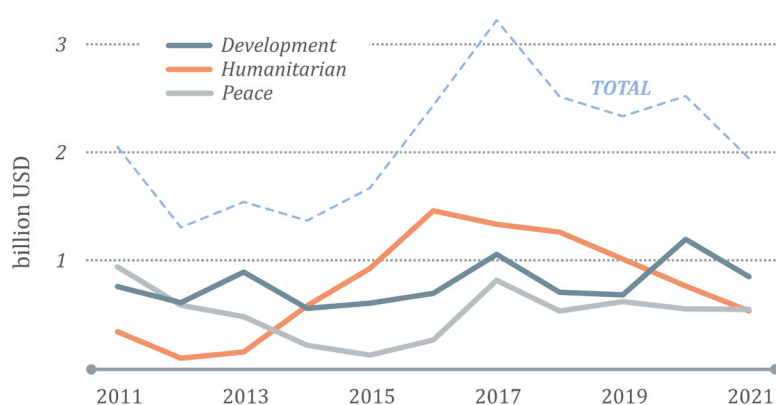
Data source: OECD (2022), "Creditor Reporting System: Aid activities". Design: Jason Krämer, Ben Buchenau, BICC, 11/ 2023.

How did the HDP Nexus Come into Being in Iraq?

The decision to implement the HDP approach in Iraq in 2017 coincided with the country just emerging from of the violent defeat of Islamic State (IS) forces by the US-led international anti-IS coalition after IS had seized control of over one-third of western Iraqi territory and large parts of eastern Syria between 2014 and 2017. Prior to this, Iraq had been severely weakened by more than a decade of UN sanctions imposed on the country following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991). The US-led invasion in 2003 that aimed at removing Saddam Hussein and ending three decades of dictatorship further destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. This included the destruction of water supply and treatment, electricity distribution and telecommunications (military and civilian) (Mufti & Parker, 2003). The United States' claim that the Iraqi regime had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction as a justification for the invasion was later proven false. By 2013, the

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1 \ Since 2018, Iraq has further been one of 12 focus countries of the German BMZ Transitional Development Aid funding line (Schröder & Schilbach, 2019). In Iraq, Somalia and Lebanon, this took the shape of the 'chapeau' approach, which has meant that two projects were co-financed by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) for a humanitarian component and by the BMZ for a development/peace component. Together, both are expected to work in a complementary manner, hence implementing the HDP approach (BMZ, 2021, p.14).

war and its violent aftermath had killed between 134,000 and 250,000 civilians, with many more dying from secondary effects (epidemics, lack of medical care). In addition, during the IS period alone, six million Iraqis had to flee their homes and were internally displaced, of whom 1.2 million are still unable to return today (WFP, 2023, p. 1).

A colonial mindset manifested itself in a discursive shift that portrayed international aid as a necessity due to a perceived "lack of social capacity" in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

The decision by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority to dismantle the Ba'thist state bureaucracy and the Iraqi Army created a power vacuum that led to the rapid proliferation of non-state armed groups across the country and subsequent cycles of violent conflict and war.[2] In addition, the sudden shift from a Sunni to a Shia-dominated ruling elite in 2003 fuelled sectarian strife and political polarisation. From a Western perspective, Iraq was expected to (be) steered towards 'liberal peace'. From a decolonial perspective, the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) signalled a shift away from strengthening the state bureaucracy and monopoly of violence and towards the US as a foreign actor orchestrating replacing both altogether. In this process, Schirch (2022, pp. 2-4) highlights how a colonial mindset manifested itself in a discursive shift that portrayed international aid as a necessity due to a perceived "lack of social capacity" in fragile and conflict-affected countries—rather than critiquing the policy failures of Western military interventions and the enforced integration of countries like Iraq into the global economic and trade system as part of the problem.

Socially and economically, the situation in Iraq today is characterised by a paradox: On the one hand, Iraq is a resource-rich country, with crude oil exports accounting for 95 per cent of the Iraqi state revenues (Fazil & Tartir, 2023). On the other hand, since 2003, the neoliberal 'marketisation' of Iraq by the International Monetary Fund and others, cuts in minimum wages, low corporate taxes, decisions to remove key tariffs on imports and to open the country to foreign companies to enter Iraq with full rights to repatriate profits, as well as sweeping privatisation are seen as the driving forces behind skyrocketing unemployment, which reached 60 to 70 per cent in the 2000s (Marfleet, 2007; Zunes, 2006)—now officially at 15.5 per cent, but probably much higher in reality. At the time of writing, large swathes of the Iraqi population continue to suffer from poor access to health services, poverty (24.8%), and an education crisis caused in part by years of disrupted schooling due to war and violence (ACAPS, 2020; Hassan, 2023; WFP, 2023; ICVA, 2022).

Since 2015, mass protests that later coalesced into the Tishreen Movement have called for an end to government corruption and abuse of power by the armed forces, for electoral reform of the ethno-sectarian political system, investment in basic services and employment, and judicial accountability of the government and armed groups. They have repeatedly been brutally repressed (Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, 2021). The security situation in Iraq remains highly volatile: Military control across Iraq remains to be fragmented between the Iraqi military, powerful paramilitary forces and non-state armed groups, which continue to pose a threat to a very fragile 'peace'—as well as the presence and influence of the US military, Iran and Turkey. In light of these developments, the European Union chose Iraq as a pilot country for the HDP approach in 2017 to avoid a re-escalation of violence and to better link aid activities in all three fields.

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2 \ Iraq was formally under US occupation between March 2003 and June 2004, although the United States maintained military control until at least 2011 (cf. Roberts, 2005).

Key Documents for the HDP Nexus in Iraq

From the perspective of the decolonial critique, the first question is: How much weight do external actors, such as the United Nations and the European Union, carry in the design and implementation of the HDP in Iraq in relation to the Iraqi government? Although the HDP as a concept was formally launched by the United Nations at the 2016 Global Humanitarian Summit as a major shift towards a bottom-up approach in the aid sector, the way in which the HDP nexus has been designed and implemented in Iraq is strongly "international partner-driven" (European Commission, 2022, p. 14). This is reflected in the overarching structure of HDP implementation and in key UN guidance documents (see Figure 2). The IASC structure in red shows coordination in the humanitarian sphere, while the durable solutions framework in grey shows the coordination across the H-D-P spheres. In Iraq, as shown in the diagram below, HDP implementation is led by (1) the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG), (2) the UN Resident Representative and (3) the UN Humanitarian Coordinators. This UN structure operates in parallel to the Iraqi government (as on the right) and is expected to coordinate with the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). All UN activities are intended to complement the Iraqi government's National Durable Solutions Framework.[3]

> The way in which the HDP nexus has been designed and implemented in Iraq is strongly "international partner-driven".

Figure 2: Durable Solution Mechanism in Iraq
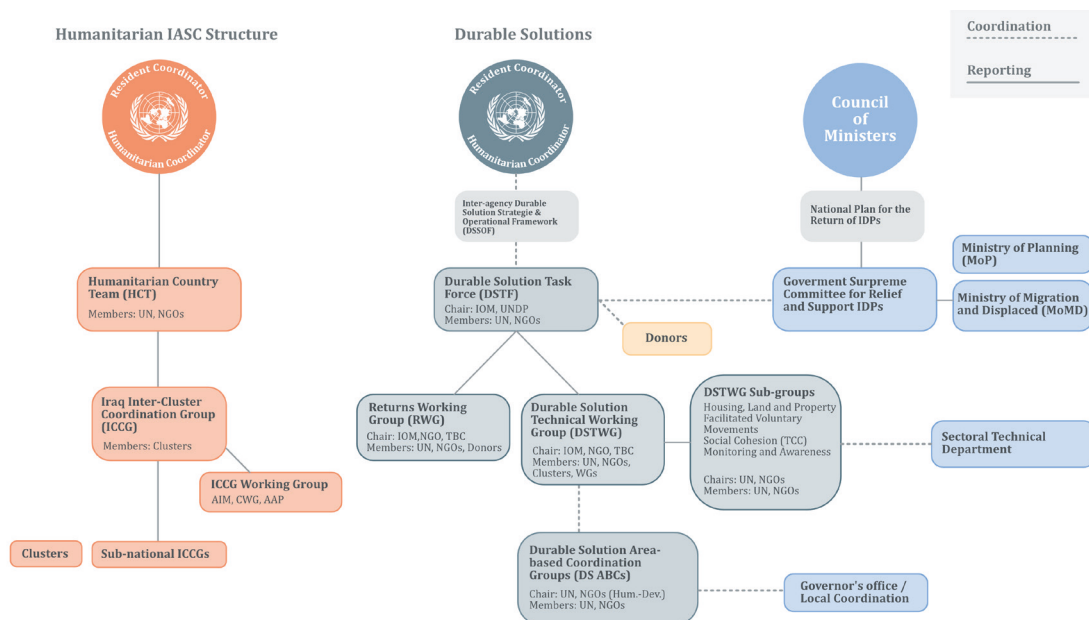
Source: adapted from Iraq Durable Solutions 2023

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3 \ However, beyond the introductory statement, the only reference to the HDP nexus is under Strategic Objective 6 Social cohesion: Populations affected by displacement are able to live together peacefully and in safety, with inter-communal trust strengthened by aiming for "[i]ncreased coordination between social cohesion, humanitarian and development actors to strengthen existing and new initiatives, and nexus programming" (Government of Iraq, 2021, p. 26).

From 2023, the humanitarian response has been phased out as the United Nations expects the Iraqi government to have developed a system of governance, income generation, service provision and resource management that will enable it to take over responsibility for the country's social needs (ICVA, 2022, p. 5).[4] HDP implementation in Iraq is based on three key UN guidance documents: the Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework (Government of Iraq, 2021; ICVA, 2022), the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) (UN Iraq, 2020), and the new Common Country Analysis (CCA) (UN Iraq, 2021).[5]

First, it is noteworthy that the HDP nexus for Iraq is tailored to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, reflecting UN and EU interests. HDP planning and implementation is guided by the Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework, which underpins the durable solutions mechanism established by the international community "in support of government efforts to resolve internal displacement in Iraq" (Government of Iraq, 2021, p. i). It is co-chaired by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Progamme (UNDP) (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022, p. 21). Thus HDP implementation prioritises the return of refugees and IDPs into areas formerly under IS control in northern Iraq. As of August 2023, 1.2 million people remain internally displaced, compared to 4.8 million returnees (UNHCR, 2023, p. 1). Although the United Nations and the Iraqi

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government see the HDP approach as inextricably linked to the question of how to facilitate durable solutions for northern Iraq, that is the return of Iraqi IDPs and refugees to their places of origin, these areas include the disputed territories of Ninewa, Erbil, Diyala, Salah al-Din and Kirkuk. The central Iraqi government in Baghdad and the regional government of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Erbil are competing for control of these areas.[6] Thirty-seven per cent of IDPs are from Ninewa alone (Government of Iraq, 2021, p. 13). Various armed actors linked to political parties seek to prevent returns to influence local voting behaviour and political support in their favour. Problematically, powerful semi- and non-state armed groups such as the mainly Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces (*hashd al-sha'bi*), linked to the central Iraqi government, the Kurdish peshmerga and others continue to control different parts of northern Iraq military, while Turkish air strikes on the area continue and US forces also maintain a presence. From one locality to another and even within one locality, the constellation of actors, the level of tension and the ongoing violence and destruction/(lack of) reconstruction vary significantly.

Designating 'durable solutions' for refugee/IDP return as the main overall aim of HDP implementation in Iraq for all aid actors reflects a prioritisation of return by external actors, that is the United Nations and the European Union as major donors, who have also decided to focus their response on northern Iraq. While there is no doubt that the large-scale destruction of infrastructure and housing following the formal defeat of IS in the area does require significant support through aid, it is worth noting that southern Iraq has also been suffering from poverty, the effects of climate change on the agricultural sector and the legacy of decades of neglect during the Saddam Hussein regime. Despite this, the south has received significantly less aid funding.

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4 \ Already in 2022, the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) funding was halved to US $377 million. The transition means that is in 2023, the HRP for Iraq was ceased, and all humanitarian activities were planned to be handed over to the Iraqi government (ICVA, 2022).

5 \ As specified in the OECD-DAC Guidance on the HDP, for each country in which the HDP nexus is being implemented, the United Nations and the government are expected to produce a set of key documents for country-specific guidelines. These should specify joint analyses, create coordination structures, facilitate joint implementation across the three sectors (H, D and P) and identify collective outcomes to be pursued by all actors involved.

6 \ At the time of writing, 637,689 persons who are internally displaced are originally from Ninewa, followed by 131,219 from Salah al-Din and 128,771 from Anbar (IOM, 2023).

The second key framework for HDP implementation, the UNSDCF, places a strong emphasis on peace-building: Its Strategic Priority No. 1 is to achieve social cohesion, protection and inclusion—including peace (UN Iraq, 2020, p. 48). For each country implementing the HDP nexus, the OECD-DAC recommends a UNSDCF to coordinate the planning and implementation of all UN agencies working across different sectors under the overarching umbrella of the nexus. This has also been put in place in Iraq. Peacebuilding is mainly implemented by UNDP in the 'liberated areas', that is northern Iraq. It focuses on eight main topics of engagement: Preventing violent extremism, engaging religious leaders, supporting women peacebuilders, the reintegration of IS-affiliated families, as well as support for local authorities and community-based organisations, local peace and dialogue committees in 28 districts, youth peace groups, and citizen journalists and media (UNDP, 2023).[7] In addition, the HDP is expected to be implemented by the area-based coordination (ABC) groups, which are to bring together humanitarian, development, stabilisation, and peacebuilding actors on a regular basis and engage with local authorities to understand which joint activities can support 'durable solutions' (OCHA, 2021, p. 15).

Although the UNSDCF does make a general reference to the political and military fragmentation of the country, it does not specify how these realities should be resolved or managed in the implementation of aid deliveries, particularly with regard to peacebuilding in the disputed territories in northern Iraq. The UNSDCF portrays the obstacles to development as if these were apolitical: "To institutionalise the triple nexus (…) in Iraq, the Cooperation Framework (CF) integrates peace building, development, and resilience commitments to address the structural impediments that hinder Iraq's progress to sustainable development" (UN Iraq, 2020, p. 6).

Here, the United Nations identifies "structural impediments" as a major obstacle to sustainable development in Iraq, without specifying what these impediments are. Conversely, the UNSDCF fails to acknowledge the concrete political and military situation and the role of competing state authorities, particularly in the north. The conflict over control of the disputed territories remains a highly sensitive issue that has, for example, hampered reconstruction, freedom of movement, judicial reform and the prosecution of war criminals throughout the north for more than two decades. The fragmentation of political control also implies competing and sometimes diametrically opposed visions for peace and development by powerful state, semi- and non-state armed groups, as well as political parties and social movements, such as the Tishreen Movement. The UNSDCF, the basic guiding document for HDP implementation in Iraq, thus ignores key topics of concern to the wider Iraqi population and presents the implementation of the HDP nexus as an apolitical endeavour.

Third, the United Nations has also issued the new Common Country Analysis for Iraq twice so far, in an attempt to further coordinate the work of different UN agencies in Iraq, as required by the OECD-DAC recommendations on HDP implementation (UN Iraq, 2021; 2022). It includes very brief analyses of the country context on a wide range of issues. However, although the CCAs were intended to facilitate HDP planning and implementation, in this case, they do not even mention the HDP approach.

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7 \ Unlike in other countries, in Iraq, there is no dedicated Peacebuilding Fund or UN peacekeeping force in place. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) does not represent a military mission, but is mandated to facilitate political dialogues at the local, national and regional level, to support elections and to provide advice on juridicial and legal reform.

As this overview shows, while the HDP nexus has indeed been incorporated into key UN-level planning documents for Iraq, the impact of the re-introduction of the HDP nexus as a guiding concept for aid delivery remains largely unclear at the time of writing. Although Leiderer and Keilbach (2019), in their joint ministerial evaluation of Germany's civil engagement in Iraq, identified the need for joint operationalisation and milestones that include all HDP components, the IASC has criticised the lack of a common vision in terms of formulating collective outcomes in the planning and implementation of the HDP approach Iraq (IASC, 2021, p. 4). Indeed, no collective outcomes have been agreed between the government of Iraq and the UN Country Team (IOM, 2022, p. 50). This critique, however, raises three questions from a decolonial perspective: In what ways is it desirable and realistic to expect agreed collective outcomes and thus goals in a country characterised by highly contested politics, economic interests and competition between armed groups, when these common goals include development and peace objectives—which are inherently political? How is decision-making power on such issues distributed among UN agencies, INGOs, local NGOs and the wider Iraqi population? And to what extent are the different objectives and prioritisation among UN agencies—and also among INGOs and local NGOs more broadly—complementary or potentially creating conflict, not only among themselves, but also within Iraq?

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HDP Implementation by UN Agencies

Failure to Monitor how Aid Activities Affect Conflict Dynamics

HDP implementation as outlined in the three key frameworks has proven very difficult in Iraq. While evaluations of HDP implementation by UN agencies are still scarce, they point to a number of key challenges while remaining silent on others. As required by the Common Conflict Analysis, the Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Subgroup has conducted regular conflict analyses (IASC, 2021, p. 6). Beyond this, however, "(j)oint data collection and analysis, joint planning, and joined- up programming—including formulating collective outcomes - as well as collaborative monitoring and evaluation to enhance program effectiveness—are mostly or completely absent" even among major UN agencies, let alone the wider actors (ICVA, 2022, p. 29). In part, this lack of coordination is due to a shortage of staff dedicated to coordinating HDP implementation across UN agencies in Iraq (IOM, 2022) but also to the fact that UN agencies continue to prioritise those activities that are at the core of their own mandates in their implementation (European Commission, 2022, p. 49).

> From a decolonial perspective, competition for funding and divergent priorities reflect a wider conflict between the agenda-setting of aid agencies and foreign states as donors.

Competition for funding and divergent priorities thus also hinder joint data collection, analysis, planning and programming among UN agencies. From a decolonial perspective, such conflicts reflect a wider conflict between the agenda-setting of aid agencies and foreign states as donors, including through bilateral aid. Similarly, the competition, motivations and goals of external actors' peacebuilding activities make them prioritise their own interests. In turn, most of the needs, demands and prioritisation of peacebuilding activities as they are perceived here by the Iraqi population and other internal, civilian, key stakeholders are silenced and sidelined, which hinders the emergence of sustainable, self-determined action for peace (Schirch, 2022, p. 18). At the same time, a common point on which hardly any of the sources available to date comment is the extent to which HDP implementation is also hampered by the interference of non-state armed groups and paramilitary forces, although this is likely to occur on a daily basis. Political and armed actors in Iraq are silencing demands for change from within society. As civil society spaces for discussing and developing approaches to peace are shrinking, it is crucial that international aid actors find alternative ways to recognise Iraqi agency and engage with existing, diverse ideas and initiatives within Iraqi civil society, rather than seeking to 'take over leadership' or 'liberate' Iraqi society (Schirch, 2022; Rodriguez Iglesias, 2020).

> None of the HDP evaluations carried out so far have assessed how the wider population and the Iraqi government perceive the activities of individual UN agencies, their priorities and approaches in Iraq.

HDP implementation by UN agencies has been further constrained by the fact that the government is not yet perceived as a reliable cooperation partner. Interviewees told ICVA that they feared that handing over the planning and implementation of humanitarian aid to the government could lead to a collapse in services to those in need (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). This is a particular problem when, as Hartmann et al. (2022a) note, the Iraqi government has also been unwilling to take over visible ownership of aid programmes when the United Nations or other donors have sought to hand over responsibility.

How to Increase the Accountability of UN Agencies Towards Local Communities?

From a decolonial perspective, it is also worth noting that none of the HDP evaluations conducted out so far have assessed how the wider population and the Iraqi government perceive the activities of individual UN agencies, their priorities and approaches in Iraq. Few have considered the perceptions of Iraqi NGO staff (see below). At the same time, an evaluation of IOM in Iraq found that respondents felt that the principles of accountability to affected populations as developed by UNHCR were generally insufficiently applied in Iraq (HDPN 26). Similarly, only 56 per cent of interviewees saw no conflict between the humanitarian principles of IOM's mandate and its commitment to peace activities through the adoption of the HDP approach. In particular, in view of IOM border and camp management activities and the repatriation of Iraqi nationals from al-Hol camp in eastern Syria to Iraq, interviewees stressed the need for greater risk assessment and expressed concern about the extent to which such activities were consistent with the humanitarian principles (IOM, 2022, p. 24). For HDP implementation, DuBois (2020) raised the question: "In protracted crises, should development agencies set up dedicated programme streams to build people's ability to exercise agency and accountability over humanitarian agencies?" (p. 21). Indeed, a decolonial perspective sheds light on the fact that given the high financial volume of aid in Iraq, it is necessary to extend the question to the development and peacebuilding sectors, asking how accountability to and agency of the Iraqi people can also be ensured in UN programming so that it does not eclipse the politics of negotiating welfare needs, prioritsation or the question of which areas in a country aid responses should focus on.

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Implementing the HDP Nexus Beyond the United Nations

Localisation: Uneven Expectations Towards Local and International NGOs

In Iraq, the involvement of international and local NGOs in HDP implementation is very limited and has decreased over time. For example, in the Humanitarian Response Plan 2021, only four per cent of funds for humanitarian assistance went through Iraqi NGOs, while 77 per cent went to INGOs and 18 per cent to UN agencies (+7% pooled funds) (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). This practice runs counter to the HDP concept's stated aim of strengthening localisation. This is also underlined by the IASC's Mapping Good Practice report, which sees local agency and partnership with local NGOs as a prerequisite for broad outreach to local communities and as crucial to strengthening the implementation of an HDP approach in Iraq (IASC, 2021, p. 4). From a decolonial perspective, however, the current definition of a 'local' NGOs is problematic. It was originally drafted to include "NGOs/CSOs operating in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international NGO/CSO", which together with national NGOs (that is those operating country-wide), should receive at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding. De facto, however, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is responsible for determining this definition, added that also country offices of INGOs should also be considered 'national' or 'local', thus undermining the original commitment (Paige, 2021, p. 14). On a positive note, the UN Humanitarian Cluster in Iraq was the only such cluster in the Middle East and North Africa to include local NGOs alongside INGOs at all, thus ensuring that local NGOs could participate in coordination processes and apply for limited funding in the humanitarian sector (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). At the time of writing, it is unclear to what extent this approach of including local NGOs will be continued in the new Joint Working Groups that bring together development and peacebuilding actors after the phasing out of the UN-led humanitarian response.[8]

> From a decolonial perspective, the current definition of a 'local' NGOs is problematic.

Although local NGOs receive little direct funding from international donors, some local NGOs receive funding indirectly through INGOs and also implement the HDP. For example, World Vision has been working with the HDP approach in northern Iraq since 2017 in areas controlled by either the central Iraqi government or the Kurdish autonomous region in fragile urban contexts. However, World Vision points out that while long-term presence and partnerships with local NGOs are key enabling factors for HDP implementation, they perceive short-term funding and thinking rather than a long-term development perspective as major barriers to implementing the HDP nexus (World Vision, 2022, p. 3). This is a deeper problem for HDP implementation as a whole in Iraq, as most funding is for very short-term projects only (mostly four to six months). Interviewees in the ICVA study stated that due to the country's oil wealth, substantial long-term funding was not seen as appropriate because the government should instead "take care of the well-being of its own people" (ICVA, 2022, p. 5).

However, as the protests of the Tishreen Movement show, the oil revenues generated at the level of Iraqi and foreign elites have not translated into a functioning social welfare system. While ending corruption is one of the movement's core concerns, a study by the Iraqi Humanitarian Fund on corruption among Iraqi NGOs also identified corruption as a major challenge in the aid sector. As a result of this study, Iraqi Humanitarian Fund money to local NGOs was cut from 46 per cent to nine per cent between 2016 and 2017 (Clements, 2021, p. 11).

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8 \ Among the UN agencies other than UNDP, the ILO is also stating its commitment to linking its Employment Intensive Investment Programming to the HDP approach. From the ILO's perspective, it is involved in emergency (humanitarian aid) and longer-term (development) employment activities. Complementing this, the ILO argues that by creating a working environment where people from different backgrounds interact, this would contribute to dialogue and social cohesion (ILO, 2023, p. 38). As this approach is very new, it remains to be seen how it will work in practice.

At the same time, as previous studies have shown, the behaviour of INGOs in Iraq has also been subject to scrutiny by the Iraqi people. After 2003, the close collaboration between some aid agencies and the US-led multinational forces often led to the perception—justified or not—that INGOs were corrupt and lacked neutrality, while staff were seen as lacking the knowledge to behave in a culturally appropriate manner (Hansen, 2008, p. 129). At the time, NGO staff asked: "Why do we have to act according to the habits of Northern countries in our work? People feel an obligation to try to behave like Westerners," which was felt as an imposition (Hansen, 2008, p. 130). What is striking at present is that there has been no public in-depth evaluation of how UN agencies and INGOs have dealt with expectations of bribery and corruption in Iraq over the past few years, and, if they managed to avoid it, how they have done so. As highlighted in the decolonial critique, the "lack of trust in non-Western, non-White practitioners' abilities is a manifestation of the 'White gaze'" through which the aid system replicates colonial attitudes and norms (Paige, 2021, p. 14)—but without subjecting the global northern-dominated actors of the aid system to the same scrutiny. Indeed, only a very recent investigation in January 2024 shows that UNDP in Iraq did actively engage in corruption at a significant scale, which will require further critical assessment (Foltyn, 2024).

> **Local NGOs often emphasise that the United Nations and INGOs see them as implementers rather than as partners with the will and ability to develop their own capacities, which they seek to change.**

Meanwhile, local NGOs often emphasise that the United Nations and INGOs see them as implementers rather than as partners with the will and ability to deveop their own capacities, which they seek to change (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). From the perspective of the decolonial critique, it is worrying that local NGOs perceive a decrease in incentives for localisation in Iraq and an erosion of local NGOs. As has been observed since the beginning of the international aid response in 2003, the fact that INGOs can offer better working conditions and salaries than local NGOs, especially for urban, highly educated Iraqi staff, has led to a shortage of highly qualified staff among local NGOs (Clements, 2021, p. 11). However, INGOs also often show a preference for hiring international staff. In previous decades, local staff with strong expertise (e.g. engineers) were often not recruited. Now, valuable local knowledge continues to be overlooked in the HDP implementation (Barakat & Milton, 2020, p. 10).

Specific to the HDP approach, not only the United Nations, but also, and in particular, local NGOs lack the funding and time to allow staff to attend coordination meetings (Clements, 2021, p. 11). As existing evaluations and our own research show, local NGO staff often have limited awareness of the HDP nexus as a concept or of the overarching international aid structure in Iraq (ICVA, 2022, p. 5) and are rarely given access to HDP training activities by larger INGOs (which, in fact, are often lacking for INGO staff beyond the management leve, tool). Furthermore, the language spoken at meetings is English, which also hinders the access and participation of local NGO staff (Clements, 2021, p. 11). Conversely, international INGO staff in Iraq are not expected to speak Arabic.

Peacebuilding: The Need for Locally Grounded Conflict Analyses and Responsive Project Implementation

Our research shows that local conflict dynamics, particularly in areas with a strong presence of competing state military, paramilitary and non-state armed groups, are complex and require conflict analysis that needs to be repeated at very regular intervals throughout a project cycle. In many cases, only local staff have in-depth knowledge of the local context, history and conflict dynamics. It would, therefore, be crucial to use this local knowledge to evaluate the impact of HDP implementation on local conflict dynamics. A decolonial perspective highlights that such key local knowledge is largely not used for such evaluations—leading to a lack of accountability of UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs to the populations they serve. Although risk assessments are often mandatory at the proposal, submission and planning stages of projects, the lack of

regular monitoring and conflict sensitivity of how aid projects implement the HDP approach is particularly critical (Leiderer & Keilbach, 2019, p. 7). For example, even though peace and conflict assessments have been carried out for BMZ-funded projects since 2013, while the GFFO has used stabilisation risk analyses (SRA), Leiderer and Keilbach (2019) still note a "lack of promising approaches". In their view, for example, conflict sensitivity and gender are now increasingly taken into account in project planning but not in implementation and monitoring (Leiderer and Keilbach 2019, 8). As a result, monitoring does not capture unintended negative impacts and is "more output than impact-oriented" (Leiderer, 2022, p. xxvii). In fact, regular conflict analyses of the HDP approach in Iraq also appear to be lacking in the United Nations, which represents a significant gap. The Common Country Analyses do not fill this gap, as they provide very general contextual information for Iraq as a whole, but do not contain detailed and locally specific analyses.

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In terms of the actual implementation of the HDP nexus in Iraq, the peace component has been fraught with challenges. In the experience of World Vision, the Iraqi central government and the KRI government are "not very supportive of third parties' peacebuilding efforts", which only allows for very limited programming, limited to aspects of social cohesion as implemented by local NGOs. In their view, "ethno-religious and political tensions at the community level impede the durability of interventions, especially for IDPs" (World Vision, 2022, p. 3 FN 82). Interviewees in our current research on HDP implementation by other INGOs and local NGOs also stressed that it is very difficult to carry out peace activities in Iraq, in particular because official authorities and other local actors, including armed actors, perceive such activities as unwanted interference. INGOs and NGOs are thus confronted with a shrinking civil society space. In addition, peacebuilding is challenging for two main reasons. First, as interviewees from Sinjar pointed out, they feel that the time is not yet ripe to implement, for example, social cohesion activities in Sinjar. As interviewees pointed out, since the genocide of the Yazidi population by Islamic State forces in 2014, mistrust, a lack of access to the justice system and the persecution of perpetrators, and the absence of other forms of transitional justice have led to persistent fear among the wider population. It is worth noting that measures identified by the local population as necessary have not been introduced in the last nine years, particularly in the justice sector. The demand for such measures points to the need for governance and justice reform.

Second, some interviewees also do not see social cohesion activities as appropriate because the continued presence of competing armed groups and the fact that control of the territory remains disputed between the two Iraqi governments cannot be resolved among the local population. Instead, they highlighted the need for international actors—some of whom support these forces—to bring together armed actors and other authorities at the local and national levels who are blocking a political and right-based solution rather than pursuing their own political and economic interests. As a result, peace activities in the form of social cohesion at the local level among the population are sometimes not perceived as a helpful approach. Similarly, in other parts of Ninewa governorate, interviewees argued that peacebuilding activities are very difficult to implement in Iraq because they raise objections from armed and political actors, even at the local level. While in some cases, peace activities, such as the establishment of peace committees, have been carried out in a participatory manner despite such resistance, our future research will analyse under what conditions and with what effects this has proved feasible.

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Conclusion

To address the question of how the HDP nexus has been implemented in Iraq, and to what extent a decolonial perspective opens up new ways forward, this Spotlight Paper has analysed three main aspects that invite us to rethink and reform the way the HDP approach is designed and implemented in Iraq: namely, priority-setting, localisation and peacebuilding. Key points that invite further debate in Iraq and beyond include:

Priority-setting: The HDP nexus as an external, UN-driven top-down approach versus the need for accountability and measuring the impact of aid on conflict dynamics: Although the HDP approach was intended to strengthen a bottom-up approach to aid delivery in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors, it was largely designed and implemented as a top-down approach with little participation of local NGOs and wider communities in these decision-making processes for the whole of Iraq. The decolonial perspective illustrates how this top-down approach reflects a power imbalance in the wider aid system whereby external actors from the global North, such as the United Nations and larger INGOs, decide upon the agenda, priorities and chosen localities of aid delivery in Iraq. Instead, a decolonial perspective invites us to question the extent to which these fundamental decisions can be made in ways that prioritise the knowledge, needs and capacities of Iraqi actors and communities. A decolonial perspective also invites us to ask: To what extent can these fundamental decisions be made in a way that also holds powerful actors such as the United Nations accountable to local populations? How can the United Nations, INGOs and local NGOs conduct regular conflict analyses that assess and measure the impact—including unintended negative and positive effects—of aid activities before, during and after a project? And how can the aid system move towards prioritising the knowledge, needs and capacities of Iraqi actors and communities, including at the levels of policy design, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation?

> Although the HDP nexus was intended to strengthen a bottom-up approach.... it was largely designed and implemented as a top-down approach with little participation of local NGOs ... in the decision-making process.

Unequal expectations of international donors towards UN agencies and INGOs versus local NGOs: Specifically for Iraq, the analysis has shown that a decolonial perspective allows us to identify how existing power imbalances between the United Nations, INGOs and local NGOs do not only affect staff in the international aid system in Iraq in different ways, but also whole organisations. For example, we have shown that local NGOs are subject to accountability requirements and investigations into how they deal with corruption, while UN agencies and INGOs from the global North have not been subject to the same transparency requests. This is despite the fact that they hold the largest share of aid funding and have a strong impact on local, regional and national conflict dynamics in Iraq. A very recent study, published in January 2024 shows that UN agencies such as UNDP have in fact been a primary actor in Iraqi corruption (Foltyn, 2024). However, these influences are only now beginning to be part of discussions in the aid sector, while pointing us to critical issues that will require extensive analysis and debate. As Aloudat and Khan argue for the humanitarian and development sectors, the aid system will need to "move away from making decisions on behalf of people to following their lead and providing technical assistance and resources when they need it" (Aloudat & Khan, 2022). Furthermore, I concur with Schirch, who emphasises that current approaches to

> In this "social justice paradigm", which is in line with a decolonial perspective, Iraqi professionals, civil society actors and also the population at large must not be seen as "a unit of analysis" but as knowledgeable actors and thinkers of security, aid and politics.

peacebuilding do not work in contexts where a government does not reform its governance, corruption persists and civil society spaces are increasingly repressed. In such contexts, peacebuilding that adopts a "stabilisation-paradigm" only freezes the status quo. Instead, what is needed is a "social justice paradigm" that seeks to support protecting civil society spaces and facilitate skills development in a manner that respects self-determination (Schirch, 2022, p. 10) of the Iraqi people. In this "social justice paradigm", which is in line with a decolonial perspective, Iraqi professionals, civil society actors and also the population at large must not be seen as "a unit of analysis" but as knowledgeable actors and thinkers of security, aid and politics (see Rodriguez Iglesias, 2020, p. 209). Clearly, neither Iraqi nor international staff within the aid system represent homogeneous groups. Nevertheless, it is evident that current structures and power imbalances as analysed in this Paper need to be transformed in a responsible and feasible way while protecting Iraqi self-determination—also to avoid a collapse similar to that in Afghanistan—and to move forward in a more constructive manner.

Peacebuilding: Apolitical framing of the HDP nexus versus politicised realities: In Iraq, especially since the ongoing phasing out of the humanitarian response, the space for aid activities is shrinking, partly due to government restrictions and competing interests of armed actors. Protecting the remaining space is paramount. Yet major UN and OECD-DAC guidance documents portray the HDP nexus as if it were an apolitical concept that simply allows for a smoother combination of humanitarian aid, development assistance and peacebuilding and helps to prevent re-escalation of violence. In contrast, the case of Iraq shows that while the distribution of humanitarian and development aid is also part of the overall politics and economy of a country—from the national to the local level—, peacebuilding activities are perceived as particularly political and are often rejected for this reason. In Iraq, the HDP is primarily geared towards finding 'durable solutions to protracted displacement', but the question of whether, where to and how IDPs should return is politically and socially highly contentious. At the same time, peace activities that seek to negotiate conflicts within local communities are not always welcomed by competing armed groups. From a decolonial perspective, the question is: To what extent do decisions made in the United Nations- and INGO-dominated aid sector about what kind of 'peace' Iraq should seek and how it should be achieved sideline/ replace actual political processes of dialogue and negotiation within Iraqi society? Alternatively, how can such processes be transformed towards self-determination in a feasible and responsible manner?

> While the distribution of humanitarian and development aid is also part of the overall politics and economy of a country, peacebuilding activities are perceived as particularly political and are often rejected for this reason.

This Spotlight Paper on Iraq, just like the other Spotlight Papers on Mali and South Sudan that are published in parallel, highlights the limitations of the dominant localisation approach in the HDP debate, and the questions that need to be addressed from a decolonial perspective to make the HDP approach work and to build peace from the bottom up. Localisation approaches often leave no space for national and local actors to set priorities. Furthermore, an analysis from a decolonial perspective allows us to understand why HDP implementation has so far largely failed to be implemented from the bottom up. Power imbalances between donor institutions, INGOs and local actors, as well as structural racism, explain why the percentage of funds channelled to local actors is still minimal and has barely increased seven years after the initiation of the New Way of Working.

In practice, as our Discussion Paper argues, a decolonial approach to the HDP requires aid organisations and donors to reflect on and acknowledge their own positioning and biases, to support decolonising knowledge production and organisational structures, and to better engage communities throughout the project management cycle with a genuine focus on self-determination and local agency.

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