



# bicc report

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## Spotlight on Humanitarian– Development– Peace Nexus Implementation in Mali

**Civil–Military Cooperation  
from a Decolonial Perspective**

The emergence of the HDP in Mali as a militarised approach.

MINUSMA and UNDP in the lead—and in the crossfire.

HDP beyond the UN: Bottom-up approaches to conflict management in several localities.

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## Introduction

This Spotlight on Mali is part of a larger study on the implementation of the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus approach. It sheds light on the specific context of Mali and why the HDP approach has been highly contested in this context. The HDP approach 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 Mali.

**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.**

The larger study (Müller-Koné et al., 2024) uses a decolonial perspective to assess how the HDP nexus is implemented, with a particular focus 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 bet-

ter 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).

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?**

Mali is experiencing a multidimensional crisis, with an escalation of armed conflict since 2012. When we look at the crises in Mali, we see an overlap of challenges related to: (1) the resurgence of conflict; (2) humanitarian crises, which become increasingly critical as a result of conflict; and (3) governance problems, which are often one of the main bases of the overall problem and are exploited by certain armed groups. The need to integrate the ‘peace’ component into the double nexus is based on the idea that all actions should be conflict sensitive and that the involvement of all stakeholders is necessary to build peaceful societies (Ferris, 2020). In a country such as Mali, which is a crisis area, the HDP nexus seems highly relevant because of its vocation to forge political and operational alignment between peacebuilding efforts, development, and humanitarian action.

Humanitarian actors strongly resisted the adoption of the HDP approach in Mali despite its relevance in a context of ongoing armed conflict. The first actors that started implementing the HDP nexus were military missions, such as Barkhane for France, through its so-called 3D strategy (defence, diplomacy and

development)<sup>1</sup> and MINUSMA for the United Nations, through their Quick Impacts projects.<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian organisations, therefore, feared that adopting an HDP approach would lead to confusion between humanitarian action and peacekeeping. This also took place in a climate of high tension between these military structures and certain parts of the population who resented their presence, often going so far as to describe it as a neo-colonial approach. This has led to repeated demonstrations against the international military presence in Mali, organised by civil society organisations such as the "Yèrèwolo debout sur les remparts" movement. The confusion of roles feared by humanitarian actors, therefore, seemed well founded.

**Humanitarian organisations feared that adopting an HDP approach would lead to confusion between humanitarian action and peacekeeping ... and this concern seemed well founded.**

This spotlight is structured as follows: After outlining the methodology that underpins this Paper and our research in Iraq and South Sudan (cf. Meininghaus, 2024; Kemmerling 2024), I explain the emergence of the HDP approach in Mali, the socio-political context and the main framework documents on the HDP nexus for implementing the HDP nexus in Mali. I then assess the implementation by UN and non-UN agencies in the Malian context and conclude with a comparative look at HDP implementation in Mali, Iraq and South Sudan.

1 \ See: "Quel bilan pour l'opération Barkhane ?". <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r22-708/r22-7086.html>

2 \ See: "Projets à impact rapide (QIPS)". <https://minusma.unmissions.org/projets-%C3%A0-impact-rapide-qips#>

## Methodology

The findings presented here are based on semi-structured interviews with local and international NGO staff and community members in Mopti, Bandiagara, and Tenenkou (all in the Mopti region of Mali) in 2022 and 2023. In parallel, we have applied the same methodology in Iraq and South Sudan. The study 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 Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). While we are cooperating with the International

**This Spotlight Paper is based on 15 interviews conducted with International NGO and local NGO staff operating in Mali in these three regions.**

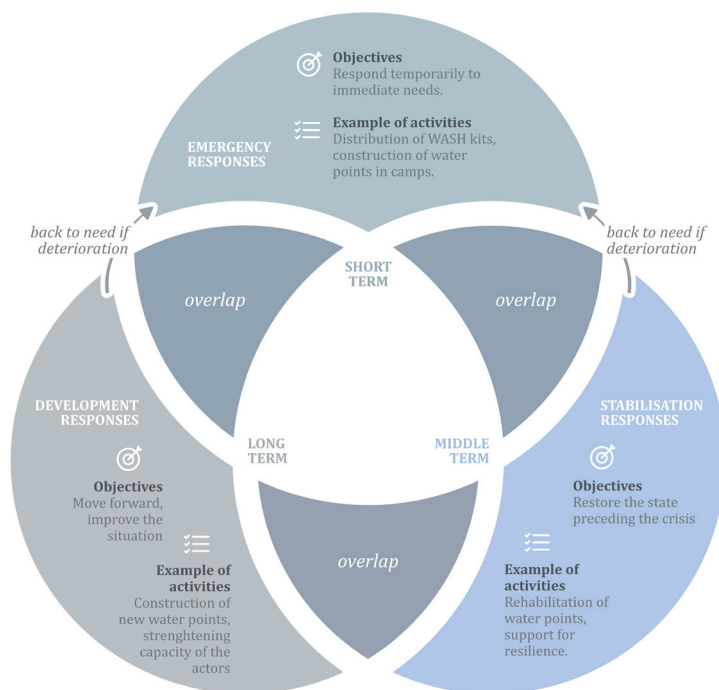
Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) in the conceptualisation and implementation of this project, the BICC research team remains independent. This spotlight is based on 15 interviews conducted with International NGO and local NGO staff operating in Mali, particularly in the above three areas in the Mopti region.

To ensure the safety and security of those interviewed, 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 Lamine Savané and Fousséyni Touré as my research assistants in these interviews.

# Civil–military Coordination in the Face of Multiple Crises

The targeted and structured implementation of the HDP approach in Mali began in 2017 following the recommendations of the UN Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team mission (STAIT).<sup>1</sup> A Steering Committee for the nexus process in Mali was set up. The Executive Cooperation Group (ECG), which brings together technical and financial partners, mandated the Post-Conflict Zones Rehabilitation Commission (PCZRC) to facilitate its implementation. Since then, the PCZRC has been working with pairs of sectoral forums (made up of thematic groups and sub-thematic groups of the Technical and Financial Partners (TFPs) and the Cluster<sup>2</sup>) to define strategic axes for each of the sectors concerned by the nexus. To ensure compliance with the different stages of the approach as set out by the UN Secretary-General in his Agenda for Humanity, the PCZRC set up a small group dedicated exclusively to the HDP nexus approach to accompany the process and advise all stakeholders in Mali. "This group developed a Nexus framework note, but due to a lack of common understanding of the key steps of the Nexus, there was no desired progress" (CPPNM - Comité de Pilotage du Processus Nexus au Mali, 2020).

**Figure 1: Multilateral frameworks**



Design: Ben Buchenau © BICC, 2024.

The rationale for implementing the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) nexus in Mali becomes clearer in light of the crises the country is facing. Since the beginning of 2012, Mali has been experiencing a general crisis that has been described as multidimensional. Some of these crises are low-intensity but long-standing, while others are more recent but intense. All of these crises are, to some extent, interconnected (Oxfam, 2019) and have a negative impact on the effective presence of the state throughout the country (CPPNM, 2020). The protracted crises are the result of a combination of structural and cyclical factors, including poor governance, climate change, which has had a major impact on natural resources management, pandemics, rapid and poorly controlled population growth,

a weak education system and underinvestment in social services and basic infrastructure (CPPNM, 2020; Carrier et al., 2020). 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.

- 1 \ The UN Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team (STAIT), which became The Peer 2 Peer Support team, has a unique role in supporting Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams to strengthen the delivery of collective humanitarian assistance and protection in field operations.
- 2 \ Clusters are groups of humanitarian organisations, both within and outside the UN system, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action, for example water, health and logistics. They are designated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and have clear coordination responsibilities. The Resident Coordinator and/or Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team manage the humanitarian response through the clusters (OCHA 2012). See: "OCHA with one voice: the cluster approach". [https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/Documents/OCHA%20on%20Message\\_Cluster%20Approach\\_vFR.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/Documents/OCHA%20on%20Message_Cluster%20Approach_vFR.pdf)

Indeed, following the Tuareg rebellion in January 2012, the entire north of Mali—the regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, covering 65 per cent of the national territory for only 10 per cent of the population—has been occupied by armed jihadist groups who have opportunistically used the Tuareg rebellion to exploit the weaknesses of the Malian Army (Haidara & Tounkara, 2021). These include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),

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the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine (the Defenders of the Faith). A partnership initially linked the two actors before the jihadists drove the Tuaregs out of several localities they had occupied together.

From late 2014, a new hotspot of violence emerged in central Mali (Mopti and Ségou regions), with jihadism spreading from the north to the centre. This materialised with the creation of the Katiba Macina jihadist group, which parts of the local population very often present as a Fulani movement, both because it is led by a Fulani preacher, Amadou Kouffa, and because it is said to be composed mainly of Fulani fighters (Haidara, 2023). In response, ethnic

self-defence militias have been set up, particularly within the Dogon community (but also by other ethnic groups), to protect themselves against external attacks. This dynamic has led to repeated deadly clashes between different armed groups, as well as very deadly attacks on Fulani and Dogon villages (e.g. Ogossagou, Songho, Sobane Da, etc.).

These different factors—combined with conflicts that are "among the 11 most serious in the world" (Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2020)—have contributed to amplifying and making chronic the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the people of Mali (CSO Partnership et al., 2021). All these factors exacerbate humanitarian needs and delay development prospects (Steinke, 2021). In this context, strict distinctions between sectors are increasingly irrelevant (Veron & Hauck, 2021). Humanitarian, development, and peace and security actors are more effective and have a more lasting positive impact, especially in protracted crises, when they coordinate their efforts rather than operating in silos (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2017). Finally, for affected communities, the distinction between humanitarian, development, peace and security efforts is artificial (Veron & Hauck, 2021).

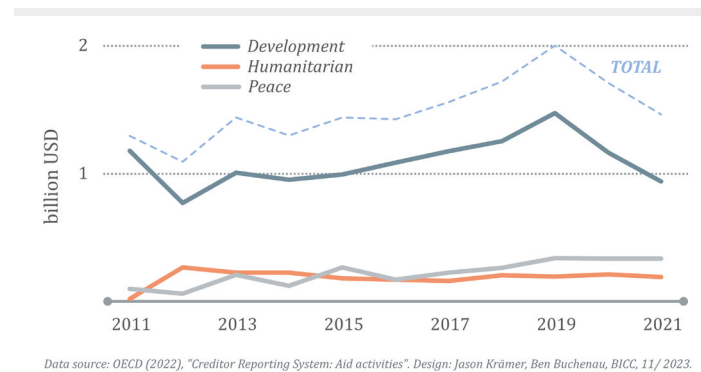
**Table 1: Overview on HDP nexus implementation in Mali**

Origins of the HDP nexus	Recommendations of the 2017 UN STAIT Mission
Current phase	Dependency on humanitarian and development aid
Key UN documents on HDP nexus for Iraq	2015–2019 United Nations Integrated Development Assistance Framework 2020–2024 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020 UNDP HDP Nexus Strategy United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) 2022–2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)
Key government of Mali-documents on HDP nexus	Strategic Framework for Economic Growth and Sustainable Development (CREDD)
Implementation of the HDP nexus by the UN	Top-down MINUSMA’s implementation of Quick Impact Projects has blurred the line between humanitarian action and peacekeeping mission
Implementation of the HDP nexus by organisations other than the UN	Contribution of local NGOs limited to providing support to INGOs—but a bottom-up approach to conflict management in several localities.

## Where does Mali Stand in Terms of Humanitarian and Development Activities?

Despite several decades of development policies and the importance of international aid, humanitarian actors often present Mali as "a very fragile country"<sup>3</sup>, with a continuous deterioration of the humanitarian situation, governance, security, etc. (Défis Humanitaires, 2019). The poverty rate remains very high, and the socio-political context is characterised by increasing violence. Despite a long-standing international presence and hundreds of millions of dollars raised and spent every year, the situation continues to deteriorate year on year. The 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan for Mali calls for US \$751.5 million. Total funding received amounted to US\$227.5 million.

**Figure 2: Financial flows of ODA to Mali (2011–2021)**



Today, Mali seems to have become dependent on a multitude of humanitarian and development aid, and its various governments, through too limited reform efforts, have become adept at the doctrine of maintaining the flow of aid, whether humanitarian, development or military (Défis Humanitaires, 2019).

In Mali, there is a de facto contradiction and separation between the structures dealing with emergencies and those dealing with development, hence the need for cooperation between the two types of actors and programmes (Loock Perrine, 2019). At the same

time, humanitarian aid needs to become more sustainable in the face of ongoing crises. The dichotomy between emergency aid and development is becoming very blurred in Mali. Therefore, the HDP nexus is meant to overcome the contradiction between emergency and development structures (Dahrendorf, 2019).

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## Key Documents for the HDP Nexus in Mali

The HDP approach has been validated by the UN Country Team for all UN actors in Mali, as visible in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF)<sup>4</sup> for Mali for the period 2020 to 2024. The implementation of the UNSDCF is presented as complementary to the 2020–2022 Humanitarian Response Plan. The HDP nexus approach, designed to broaden the partnership with the government and certain donors, has been developed in areas affected by conflict in Mali to strengthen the resilience of the population by combining actions to meet their immediate basic needs with capacity-building to meet these needs in the medium and long term. The main objective of the United Nations system (UNS), through the UNSDCF, is to contribute to accelerating the implementation of the nexus approach in areas affected by multidimensional crises, focusing on food insecurity, access to basic social services, gender-based violence and violence against children and assistance to displaced populations.

<sup>3</sup> According to the OECD, Mali is a "fragile" context, compared to Iraq and South Sudan, which are considered "extremely fragile" (OECD, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> <https://mali.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Mali%20UNSDCF%20signed%20%28002%29.pdf>



The results of the UNSDCF are in line with the collective outcomes for Mali that aid actors have collectively defined according to the HDP nexus approach (Müller-Koné et al., 2024, pp. 8–22). The collective outcomes, in turn, are aligned with the national priorities formulated in the Malian Strategic Framework for Economic Growth and Sustainable Development CREDD<sup>5</sup>, which contribute to the achievement of several of the 77 Sustainable Development Goals' targets prioritised by Mali. The expected collective outcomes are structured in three axes:

**Axis 1:** Build the capacity of institutions responsible for promoting the rule of law and the national system for the promotion and protection of human rights at the local and national levels. The United Nations system will also accompany the reconciliation process by supporting local mechanisms for dialogue, mediation, prevention and management of inter-community conflicts.

**Axis 2:** Support processes aiming to formulate and implement a strategy for strong and inclusive economic growth. Support specific government initiatives to create opportunities for decent work and income for the most vulnerable sections of the population. Support government efforts to build resilience to climate change and shocks, ensure equitable access to natural resources, develop renewable energy and improve the effectiveness of the humanitarian preparedness and response system.

**Axis 3:** The UNS will help to improve access to quality and effective basic social services, especially for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children.

As mentioned above, the UN institutions MINUSMA—representing the military component—and UNDP—representing the civil cooperation component—were among the first to put the HDP nexus into practice.

As far as MINUSMA is concerned, the HDP nexus has taken the form of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), that is its involvement in socio-economic and development projects. These include the creation of income-generating activities for young people and women's associations, and the creation of infrastructure such as bridges<sup>6</sup> and water points<sup>7</sup>.

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UNDP (2019) has drawn up a country programme document for the Republic of Mali (2020–2024), detailing its strategy and priorities for the country, including the HDP nexus. In its 2020 annual report, the UNDP mentions the implementation of the HDP nexus. However, the research team found that the HDP approach appears to have been dropped from the 2021 program and is not mentioned anywhere in the activity report. Activities for 2021 focused on inclusive governance, peacebuilding and conflict prevention (UNDP, 2022). There is also no mention of the HDP nexus approach in the strategic plan for 2022 to 2025<sup>8</sup>.

The same can be seen in the Humanitarian Response Plan for Mali. The HDP nexus is taken into account in the Humanitarian Response Plan (2020–2022), which calls for collaboration between humanitarian actors and UN agencies to implement this approach. The previous Humanitarian Response Plan (2018) mentioned the double humanitarian—development nexus but not the triple HDP nexus. However, we also note that the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan no longer mentions the HDP nexus.

This raises the question of what is behind the omission of references to the HDP in most recent UN documents. We have not been able to verify whether or not this is due to the fact that the HDP has been strongly opposed by humanitarian NGOs (see below).

5 \ Strategic Framework for Economic Recovery and Sustainable Development ; in french : Cadre stratégique pour la Relance économique et le Développement durable.

6 \ See an example of bridge construction: <https://minusma.unmissions.org/la-minusma-finance-la-reconstruction-des-ponts-de-yawakan-da-et-de-songho>

7 \ See an example of water point construction: <https://minusma.unmissions.org/r/C3%A9gion-de-gao-plus-de-16-000-personnes-seront-%C3%A0-1%E2%80%99abri-des-p%C3%A9nuries-d%E2%80%99eau>

8 \ See <https://strategicplan.undp.org/>

## Analysis of Key HDP Documents

The humanitarian strategy for 2020–2022, through the Humanitarian Response Plan, is part of an effort to coordinate action with the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020–2024 and with the Malian government’s development programming, known as the Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development (CREDD) 2019–2023.

As far as the UNSDCF is concerned, to achieve the various results, its strategy mentions a partnership that will be extended to central and decentralised government institutions (local authorities), civil society organisations, human rights organisations, the media, community organisations, women’s associations and youth associations, etc.

The strategy document clearly emphasises a bottom-up approach through participatory community planning as the basis for all resilience programmes/interventions by all actors in Mali. There is also a strong emphasis on accountability and community participation. Local development plans are used as a reference framework for local action. Local capacity-building for the leadership of local authorities, sustainability of actions undertaken and the institutionalisation of the resilience approach will become more systematic. In addition, each action draws on mapping community platforms to explore innovative community approaches. We can, therefore, say that a bottom-up approach is clearly part of the UNSDCF’s strategy. What is less clear is the extent to which the actual design of the strategy takes into account the aspirations of local people, that is the extent to which they have been consulted in the development of the plans. We will look at how the HDP strategy has been implemented later on in the Paper.

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In addition, the UNSDCF strategy contains a crucial element that resonates with the reluctance of humanitarian actors to implement the HDP nexus in Mali. This is the strengthening of civil-military coordination as a means of improving humanitarian access. The document clearly mentions the establishment of “a humanitarian response facilitated by humanitarian access and civil-military coordination” (UNSDG, 2019). This blurs the line between humanitarian and military action, which is counterproductive to the successful implementation of the HDP nexus. The same observation can also be made about the actions of MINUSMA, which is primarily a military body, but which has invested in humanitarian and development activities through the Quick Impact Projects, as we mentioned earlier.

The UNDP country programme for Mali takes into account the different dimensions of crises, namely, (1) conflict; (2) humanitarian emergencies and (3) governance problems. However, there is no clear, visible synergy of action between these three dimensions.

The UNDP strategy set out in the country programme mentions working towards greater coherence between the UNSDCF, the national Integrated Strategic Framework CREDD, UN agencies, NGOs, MINUSMA, donors, the private sector and other development actors on the Sustainable Development Goals. This would implicitly include the civil-military cooperation approach.

# HDP Implementation by UN Agencies

## MINUSMA and UNDP in the Lead—and in the Crossfire

The UNDP budget for 2023 amounted to US \$33.26 million. The breakdown of these funds shows that a large proportion—57.6 per cent of the total budget, or US \$19.18 million—were earmarked for "(p)eace, justice, and strong institutions". The remaining 42.4 per cent of the budget was to be shared among all the other sectors<sup>9</sup>.

MINUSMA's budget for 2022-2023 amounted to US \$1.2 billion. In addition to the expenditure related to its operationalisation, a fund for "other programme-related activities", totalling US \$10,433,000 was set up. This

**All the sectors funded under the PBF are directly or indirectly linked to the third pillar (peace) of the HDP nexus.**

amount served, among other things, to finance programmes related to human rights and protection, electoral support, security sector reform, improving the support provided by the Malian government to stabilise the country, gender issues and the prevention and repression of conflict-related sexual violence, etc. (UN Secretary-General, 2022) .

The United Nations Peacebuilding Fund's (PBF) financial resources amount to US \$22.6 million, which are used in a number of areas, including conflict prevention/management and social cohesion, job creation and 'youth for peace', rule of law, security, human rights and transitional justice, national state capacity building and extension of state authority and cross-border initiatives. We can see that all the sectors funded under the PBF are directly or indirectly linked to the third pillar (peace) of the HDP nexus.

### UNDP and MINUSMA's implementation of an HDP approach

UNDP's intention is to work towards greater coherence between the UN Cooperation Framework for Sustainable Development (UNFSDC), the national Integrated Strategic Framework CREDD, UN agencies, NGOs, MINUSMA, donors, the private sector and other development actors on the Sustainable Development Goals. The UNDP Mali office claims to have all these actors engaged in a joint dynamic to provide multi-sectoral responses to the complex needs of the local population, in particular internally displaced persons. It also claims that its coordinated actions have achieved several results. Finally, the UNDP office in Mali has joined forces with the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) (UNDP, 2021). Together, their areas of intervention focus on conflict prevention/management and social cohesion.

**Humanitarian actors perceived the implementation of the Quick Impact Projects by MINUSMA as a major factor adversely affecting the HDP nexus, particularly through the increasing blurring of lines between civilian and military actors.**

As far as the UNDP is concerned, its main interlocutor in the implementation of its programme remains the government. While the research team does not wish to question such cooperation with the Malian state, it does wish to highlight the fact that state institutions are highly contested in many Malian localities. Many of these localities are under the influence of various armed groups, and, to gain access to them, (humanitarian) actors must have no links with the state.

Humanitarian actors immediately perceived the implementation of the Quick Impact Projects by MINUSMA as a major factor adversely affecting the HDP nexus, particularly through the increasing blurring of lines between civilian and military actors. Many humanitarian actors consider this a worrying dynamic in most international intervention contexts, which are characterised by the complex variety of armed actors and divergent interests. According to a head of mission at the international

<sup>9</sup> \ See diagram, with the sharing of the budget by sector: <https://www.undp.org/fr/mali/financement-et-execution>

NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), specifically in Mali, through the implementation of the HDP, "military actors intend to use humanitarian interventions to build military acceptance" (The New Humanitarian, 2019). In addition, Operation MINUSMA and Barkhane have conducted humanitarian needs assessments and provided security for humanitarians in recent years (Tronc et al., 2019). Main actors, notably humanitarians, have rejected the scenario of the military entering a particular area to make it accessible to them (so that they can bring aid to the locals) (Steinke, 2021). The reason for this rejection is that it would not work because it is not based on a common understanding between opposition groups (including armed groups, particularly jihadists).

Overall, the strategy of the international community (led by France) in the fight against terrorism in Mali has ignored the voices of civil society organisations calling for a different approach to achieving peace in Mali. During the ten years of international military intervention in Mali, the crisis has spread from the north to the centre of the country and then to the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger. When, in December 2019, an Inclusive National Dialogue, which brought together the main components of Malian society, recommended opening a dialogue with the jihadists, this idea was strongly opposed by France, which led the international military intervention. This factor, combined with the failure of the military interventions, gave rise to the anti-French sentiment, which extended to MINUSMA and had already led to the premature end of French military operations in Mali. From a decolonial perspective, this approach to the Malian crises was characterised by a 'veil of ignorance' on the part of the international community, which contributed to the deepening of the military-political crisis in Mali.

**Humanitarian actors have rejected the scenario of the military entering a particular area to make it accessible to them (so that they can bring aid to the locals).**

## Implementing the HDP Nexus Beyond the United Nations

A number of documentary sources (particularly NGO project proposals) suggest that INGOs implement the HDP nexus rapidly in Mali, despite strong initial reluctance on their part. Current fieldwork has enabled the research team to observe the adoption of the HDP approach by a number of INGOs working in urban areas in collaboration with government departments and in rural areas occupied by non-state armed groups, often in very dangerous security conditions. NGOs are among the only (sometimes even the only) actors with access to certain regions in Mali, even where state services are banned. As a result, the government has often accused international NGOs of collaborating with certain armed groups, particularly jihadists. Armed groups, however, tolerate NGOs by not allowing them to carry out certain activities, in particular those related to development and peace issues. It is then up to them to find the appropriate subterfuge to implement their governance and/or peace-related activities; this is an observation that emerged from our interviews.

**Armed groups tolerate NGOs by not allowing them to carry out certain activities, in particular those related to development and peace issues.**

Finally, as far as local NGOs are concerned, their involvement in the implementation of the HDP approach is limited to providing support to international NGOs, particularly with regard to the ‘peace’ component (own interviews). However, this support is very useful because of their better knowledge of the context, history and dynamics of the conflicts. On the one hand, we were able to observe that conflict sensitivity is well emphasised in the implementation of the

projects concerned and that the projects are contextualised in so far as the conflict analysis has been carried out beforehand. On the other, the implementation of the activities—especially those related to the peace component—remains a challenge because of the context, as mentioned above, and also because of the lack of clarity around the concept of ‘peace’ (Angelini & Brown, 2023). Many staff members still struggle to define what constitutes a ‘peace’ activity. We also note that NGOs seem to prioritise the views of local people through a bottom-up approach, for example, local people being the main actors in resolving their own conflicts. In several localities in central Mali, the humanitarian NGOs we spoke to have helped to create or revitalise existing conflict management committees by improving their organisation and training their members. According to our research, the members of these committees, who belong to the community, were chosen by consensus. Many local interlocutors reported that since the committees were established, virtually all conflicts at the village level have been addressed and contained by the committees in place.

## Conclusion

This Spotlight Paper has argued that the HDP nexus got off to a controversial start in Mali. Popular ‘anti-colonial’ resistance to the presence of the French Army and MINUSMA—which were among the first structures to implement the HDP approach—has made closer cooperation between H, D and P actors particularly sensitive. The implementation of an HDP approach by the military mission MINUSMA, and the UN system’s adherence to a civil-military coordination approach have led to strong resistance from humanitarian NGOs to an HDP nexus approach in Mali. It is true that the HDP approach was referenced in the UNSDCF framework, UNDP and HRP documents between 2020 and 2021, the explicit reference to the HDP was dropped again in later policy documents. Nevertheless, a number of international NGOs, often supported by local NGOs within the framework of partnerships, are implementing the HDP nexus through a bottom-up approach. They try to ensure that they are not associated with either state or international military institutions while integrating civil, bottom-up peacebuilding activities. The research team’s current research has already identified a number of benefits that beneficiaries consider to be positive, particularly in terms of conflict prevention and resolution. In a country experiencing conflict and a number of protracted crises, the HDP nexus approach, despite all the controversy surrounding it, seems to be relevant in many respects. Mali is a case that illustrates the need for actors implementing the HDP nexus to avoid including a stabilisation and military component in the peacebuilding dimension in a context where a large part of the population perceives international interventions as neo-colonial.

**A number of international NGOs, often supported by local NGOs are implementing the HDP nexus through a bottom-up approach.**

This paper shows how, on the one hand, a militarised and top-down approach by UN institutions appeared to be an obstacle to the implementation of the HDP nexus as such, as it was contested from the outset, as well as an obstacle to a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding. In this sense, the space given to national and local actors in the implementation of the HDP nexus - as also demonstrated by the other two Spotlight Papers on Iraq and South Sudan published in parallel - clearly needs to be expanded to allow local actors to set their own peacebuilding priorities. On the other hand, some non-UN humanitarian INGOs with a bottom-up approach have been able to implement peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities in close partnership with local NGOs, even under very precarious security conditions. This demonstrates the necessity and greater effectiveness of a bottom-up approach to HDP implementation.

**Mali is a case that illustrates the need for actors implementing the HDP nexus to avoid including a stabilisation and military component in the peacebuilding dimension in a context where a large part of the population perceives international interventions as neo-colonial.**

In practice, as our main study study (Müller-Koné et al., 2024) argues, a decolonial approach to the HDP nexus requires aid organisations to reflect upon and acknowledge their own positioning and biases, to decolonise knowledge production and organisational structures and to better involve communities throughout the whole project management cycle, with a genuine focus on self-determination and local agency.

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