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Spotlight on Humanitarian– Development– Peace Nexus Implementation in South Sudan

Localisation from a
Decolonial Perspective

The emergence of the HDP in South Sudan as a top-down, state-centred approach.

Progress on localisation, but still power imbalances between international and local NGOs.

A need for more 'local led' initiatives.

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Introduction

This Spotlight on South Sudan 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. The Spotlight highlights the specific opportunities and challenges of the HDP nexus in South Sudan and emphasises the need to rethink how localisation in the HDP approach can work from a decolonial perspective.

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. A 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 (NGOs) 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

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access to funding for these local actors, international aid organisations are to work towards ‘collective outcomes’ and ‘localisation’ in a bottom-up approach. 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?**

Our key findings for South Sudan show that, first, the HDP nexus in South Sudan has emerged in a top-down and largely state-centric manner. Although humanitarian actors have not critically scrutinised its introduction as they did in Mali, for example, working with the national government raises questions of accountability. Second, localisation efforts remain limited. Although progress has been made, the shift of funds from international to national NGOs or local civil society organisations remains marginal. Third, while localisation can mean different things, in practice, it often refers to a more equitable distribution of funds between international and local actors. However, a mere transfer of funds does not necessarily overcome power imbalances in the system but runs the risk of simply reproducing them, with Western donors and debates in high-level international fora continuing to determine the direction of the support (H, D, and/or P) and the flow of money. Instead, this Spotlight Paper argues that more ‘local led’ or community-led initiatives are needed for an effective implementation of the HDP nexus (Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson, 2023, pp. 23-24).

After outlining the methodology that underpins this Paper and our research in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan (cf. Haidara, 2024; Meininghaus 2024) (2), I describe how the HDP nexus emerged as a top-down process in South Sudan and the dilemma of cooperation in a context of armed conflict (3). This is followed by a critical reflection on localisation within the UN-led implementation of the HDP nexus (4) as well as in other programmes initiated by international and national or local organisations (5). The concluding remarks compare the key findings of the South Sudan Spotlight with those of the Iraq and Mali Spotlights.

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 South Sudan in 2022 and 2023. For South Sudan, project localities are Mayendit county in Unity State, Yei River county in Central Equatoria and Torit and Magwi counties in Eastern Equatoria. In parallel, we have applied the same methodology in Mali and Iraq. 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 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.

The BICC project team has conducted around 60 interviews with (I)NGO staff operating in the three countries on the challenges and opportunities of implementing the HDP nexus, and around 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 South Sudan is based on 65 interviews with (I)NGO staff operating and communities living in the three localities mentioned above. 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.

This Spotlight Paper is based on 65 interviews with (I)NGO staff operating and communities living in the three localities.

Dilemmas of Cooperation in Fragile and Conflict-affected States

In South Sudan, the HDP debate gained momentum following the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018. Driven by the United Nations, the HDP nexus has been incorporated into key documents and programming by donors, international and national NGOs (Table 1). Most humanitarian actors consider the HDP nexus—sometimes even

In South Sudan, the HDP debate gained momentum following the signing of the R-ARCSS.

referred to as the PHD nexus to highlight the importance of the peace component—as a useful concept to address the multidimensional crises in the country (Quack & Südhoff, 2020). However, the HDP nexus has been introduced in South Sudan in a top-down and state-centred manner. This poses a dilemma for those actors for whom the national government is not a reliable partner.

Although the HDP nexus is new to South Sudan, it builds on several attempts in the past to improve the linkages between humanitarian assistance, development activities and peacebuilding (Chan & Schmidlin, 2023). One example cited by Chan & Schmidlin (2023) is the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS, 1989–2005), a large-scale but controversial relief operation led by UNICEF during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). It served to negotiate humanitarian corridors with parties to the conflict and to coordinate the relief efforts of humanitarian actors. The OLS has been criticised for directly and indirectly supporting the warring parties and prolonging the war (Johnson, 2007). However, it did link aid to peacebuilding, and it integrated development activities as part of the ‘linking relief, rehabilitation and development’ approach that emerged in the 1990s. With the end of the war in 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) aimed to further increase development interventions and to better align them with the prevailing humanitarian assistance. Following South Sudan’s independence in 2011, there was also a focus on development programmes, but this declined after the outbreak of civil war in 2013 (Figure 1). Only after the signing of the R-ARCSS and the global push for the HDP nexus are donors and aid actors gradually adopting a nexus approach. In parallel, humanitarian actors in South Sudan have been actively engaged in promoting the localisation approach in line with the HDP nexus debate.

Table 1: Overview on HDP nexus implementation in South Sudan

Origins of the HDP nexus	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018
Current phase	Humanitarian aid exceeds development aid
Key UN documents on HDP nexus for South Sudan	2019-2021/22 UN Cooperation Framework 2023-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)
Key government of South Sudan documents on HDP	2021-24 Revised National Development Strategy (R-NDS)
Implementation of the HDP nexus by the UN	Top-down One-way capacity transfer from international to local actors. Localisation attempts within Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF), South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) and Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR)
Implementation of the HDP nexus by organisations other than the UN	Some bottom-up Community-based approaches have been implemented by INGOs in partnership with national and local NGOs, funded by bilateral donors.

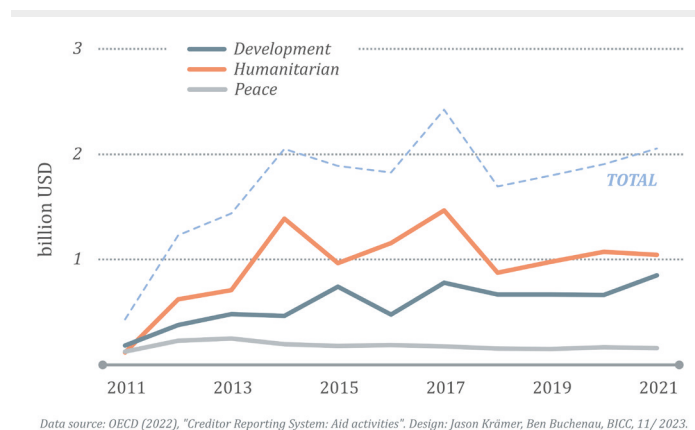
Between Humanitarian Assistance, Development Cooperation and Peacebuilding

Practically since South Sudan's independence, the volume of humanitarian aid has exceeded that of development initiatives and peacebuilding programmes (Figure 1). The violent conflict, combined with extreme weather events and a macroeconomic crisis, has created a devastating humanitarian situation for the vast majority of the population. The civil war broke out shortly after the formation of the Republic of South Sudan in July 2011, mainly as a leadership struggle, but with interdependent and highly dynamic conflict lines along geographic and ethno-political power struggles, as well as conflicts over resources such as oil, water, and land. In 2018, the R-ARCSS formally ended the war, and conflicts between the main warring parties have diminished. However, violent conflicts continue to affect communities across the country. Although these conflicts are often framed as sub-national and inter-communal violence, they are inherently political and contribute to overall political instability (Craze, 2022). At the same time, the adverse effects of climate change are placing additional burdens on the population, including extreme flooding in large parts of the country and localised drought in others.

As a result, more than 2.3 million people have fled the country since 2013, mostly to neighbouring Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the DR Congo. In addition, around 2.2 million people are displaced within South Sudan (UN OCHA, 2022). Some 6.6 million people, or 54 per cent of the population, face high levels of acute food

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Figure 1: Financial flows of ODA to South Sudan (2011–2021)



insecurity (IPC phase 3 or worse), including 66,000 people living in conditions of a famine (IPC, 2022). Overall, more than three-quarters of South Sudan's population (9.4 million people) are estimated to depend on humanitarian assistance in 2023 (UN OCHA, 2022). In 2021, South Sudan ranked last on the UNDP Human Development Index List (UN OCHA, 2022). Public infrastructure is weak; about 75 per cent of the country's population have no access to health care, and an estimated 70 per cent of adults are illiterate. Roads and other transport routes are poorly developed, unsafe and often impassable during the rainy season, while public energy, water or sanitation supply are virtually non-existent (BMZ, 2023b). Moreover, widespread poverty and decades of conflict have left people with mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (UNDP, 2022).

Given this situation, a large proportion of official development assistance (ODA) has been humanitarian aid (Figure 1). Between 2011 and 2021, funding for humanitarian assistance reached more than US \$10.4 billion, mostly in the form of food aid. In comparison, the share of development assistance reached only US \$6.3 billion over the same period (see Figure 1). The international community had supported the national peace process during and after the civil war, but funding for peacebuilding measures remained less than US \$2 billion

between 2011 and 2021 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022). However, while funding for humanitarian assistance decreased from US \$1.48 billion in 2017 (one year before the signing of the R-ARCSS) to around one billion US dollars annually since 2018, funding for peace and development has not increased but rather stagnated since 2017. Hence, even after the signing of the R-ARCSS, humanitarian assistance continues to outpace funding for development activities and peacebuilding.

Key Documents for the HDP Nexus in South Sudan

Despite the dominance of HDP funding, the push towards an HDP nexus thinking is reflected in some of the key United Nations and South Sudanese government's documents and frameworks. The HDP nexus was already referenced in the UN Cooperation Framework 2019-2021/22 (Horstmann, 2022), but it has emerged as a core element in the 2023-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) (United Nations South Sudan, 2022). The UN Country Team draws on the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Common Country Analysis (CCA) to conduct joint risk analysis with a focus on conflict sensitivity, disability inclusion and gender sensitivity across peacebuilding, humanitarian and development domains and envisages joint programming and funding across different UN agencies (UN OCHA, 2022, p. 76). They are in line with the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for 2023, which equally refers to the HDP nexus as a central principle for cooperation. The following collective outcomes have been defined (UN OCHA, 2022, p. 75).

- \ **Food security:** By the 2023 lean season from April to July, there is a 20 per cent reduction in the number of people in IPC Phase 4 and no populations in IPC Phase 5;
- \ **Gender-based violence:** Improved access to a minimum set of programme standards for prevention, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence, implemented in 80 per cent of the inter-sectoral priority locations. Focus on safe and timely access to quality case management and psychosocial support services and capacity-building to ensure service delivery by 2023; and
- \ **Disaster risk reduction:** The envisioned impact of climate change, including displacement due to drought and floods, will be 30 per cent lower in 2025 than in 2021.

The United Nation's Cooperation Framework and Humanitarian Response Plan are in line with the R-ARCSS and the Government of South Sudan's Revised National Development Strategy (R-NDS) for 2021-2024 (Republic of South Sudan & UNDP, 2021). Here, the HDP nexus is referred to as the 'triple nexus', with peace as a cross-cutting issue for the humanitarian crises and development challenges. According to the strategy, the South Sudanese Ministries of Finance and Planning and of Humanitarian Affairs intend to lead joint assessments in cooperation with development actors to identify areas for interventions along the HDP nexus and to promote joint programming with collective outcomes where they see the implementation of the HDP nexus as feasible. Although the document assures that this will be done "without infringing on humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality" (Republic of South Sudan & UNDP, 2021, pp. 80-81), this means that the government of South Sudan could at any time obstruct HDP nexus programming—a risk that was also raised by our interviewees.

The HDP nexus has emerged as a core element in the 2023-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

The external push for the HDP nexus by the United Nations in close collaboration with the transitional government thus demonstrates a top-down and state-centric approach. In general, the transitional government of South Sudan is responsible, like any other national government, for meeting the basic needs of its people and protecting them from disasters (Tschunkert et al., 2023). When it is unable to do so, cooperation between international humanitarian actors and the national government is desired and encouraged for an

effective response (Norman & Mikhael, 2023). However, working with the transitional government in South Sudan poses a dilemma for those bilateral donors and humanitarian actors for whom it is not a reliable partner, mainly due to high levels of corruption and the perpetuation of aid dependency (Tschunkert et al., 2023). Moreover, many bilateral donors are reluctant because of the government's role during the conflict. In 2020, the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan criticised government and opposition forces for having used the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare during the conflict (UNCHRSS, 2020). For these reasons, the relationship between international actors and the transitional government is complicated (Hutton & CSRE, 2018), raising the question of how to work with national governments when they are part of the problem, or what the alternatives could be (Macrae, 2019).

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is among those that have not directly cooperated with the South Sudanese government since the outbreak of the civil war in 2013 (BMZ, 2023c). Instead, the BMZ, like some other bilateral donors, works with INGOs and faith-based organisations that provide relief and rehabilitation in the country, and it supports the UN agencies, in particular the WFP and UNICEF (although the latter are working under the UNSDCF). But this strategy carries some risks: Avoiding direct cooperation with the government could encourage it to try to control the flow of humanitarian resources through other means, such as legislation and regulation. At the same time, there is little scope for international actors to hold the government to account (Tschunkert et al., 2023). Another strategy of international actors is to work with state institutions in the service delivery sector or with government authorities at the local level (Hutton & CSRE, 2018). This strategy was also mentioned in our interviews, although it is by no means a guarantee of preventing corruption and the manipulation of humanitarian goods. As one interviewee noted, knowledge of the power relations between local authorities and community members is essential for implementing projects across the HDP nexus. This means that aid organisations need to constantly reflect not only on the relationship between international actors and the transitional government in South Sudan but also on the role of the aid system in South Sudan's political economy. Humanitarian actors need to critically analyse the extent to which they can pursue a people-centred or bottom-up HDP approach in the current political setting in South Sudan, and how the government can be held accountable in the future for meeting the needs of its people and their aspirations for peace.

Aid organisations need to reflect on the relationship between international actors and the government in South Sudan and on the role of the aid system in South Sudan's political economy.

HDP Implementation by UN Agencies

Power Imbalances Between International and Local NGOs

In South Sudan, the current HDP implementation mainly refers to programmes focusing on food security, livelihoods and strengthening resilience of vulnerable people affected by conflict, economic crisis, and natural

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disasters, but also on good governance and peacebuilding. At the same time, broader aid reforms are envisaged, such as flexible financing to overcome silo thinking between the three components and the localisation of aid. ‘Localisation’ has different meanings and has been the subject of much debate in South Sudan, but there is a broad consensus that local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs)¹ should be empowered to participate in decision-making processes, take the lead in coordination and be involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance (South Sudan Localisation Framework, 2019). One step towards mainstreaming HDP

nexus thinking, increased flexible funding and localisation is through pooled funds and partnerships that aim to improve coordination between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors at the international, national and local levels.

Localisation Through Pooled Funds and Flexible Financing

A key actor in implementing the HDP nexus in South Sudan is the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The Security Council established UNMISS following the country’s independence from Sudan in 2011, with a mandate to consolidate peace and security in the country. As of February 2023, the mission has 13,810 military personnel, 1,468 police officers, and 2,676 civilians, including UN volunteers (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2022). During the civil war, the main focus was on security, as thousands of people fled to the UNMISS bases, and several Protection of Civilians sites (POCs) were established. Following the signing of the R-ARCSS, UNMISS has become more involved in peacebuilding, acting as a peace broker and, most importantly, co-managing the South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) (Quack & Südhoff, 2020). The peacekeeping mission is perceived as far less controversial than, for example, in Mali (=> *Spotlight Paper Mali* (Haidara, 2024)). The mixed roles of UNMISS for peace and security do not seem to be a problem for humanitarian actors who see UNMISS as “strategically positioned, better resourced and more neutral than domestic institutions” (Quack & Südhoff, 2020, p. 16).

The RSRTF was launched in 2018 to integrate programmes along three pillars (United Nations South Sudan, 2022, p. 43):

- \ The **reconciliation pillar** aims to rebuild trust and confidence, strengthen social cohesion and prevent conflict.
- \ The **stabilisation pillar** aims to strengthen the social contract between the citizens and state institutions, supporting the restoration of security, the rule of law and access to justice.
- \ The **resilience pillar** invests in capacities, assets and opportunities that foster inter-community interdependence and social inclusion.

¹ \ There is a wide range of national and local civil society actors in the aid system. In this *Spotlight Paper*, I refer more generally to national and local NGOs (L/NNGOs). According to the literature, national organisations are usually based in Juba but operate in different states across the country and are often linked to international actors, whereas local NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) are more likely to operate in one locality, and their engagement with international actors is mainly limited to the community, county, or state level. This is also reflected in their registration status with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) (Robinson & CSRF, 2021).

The three pillars should be part of flexible programming, where the focus on reconciliation, stabilisation and resilience can change over time to adapt to the specific dynamics of the context (Quack & Südhoff, 2020). The Fund promotes an area-based approach to programming, in which various UN agencies, NGOs and UNMISS work together. By the time of writing, the Fund had received nearly US \$80 million and allocated around US \$60 million. The main donors are Norway, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands; the main implementing partners are UN agencies and INGOs (UNDP, 2023b). In 2022, the Fund had five active projects in Central Equatoria, Warrap State, Western Bahr El Ghazal, Unity State and Jonglei/GPAA. Each project focused on reducing violence, restoring peaceful co-existence and social cohesion and had a budget of between US \$9 and US \$12.5 million. Implementing organisations include UNMISS, various UN agencies, INGOs and L/NNGOs (UN MPTF, 2023). The Fund has been considered an innovative funding tool to enable integrated programmes along the HDP nexus in some of the conflict hotspots across the country (Horstmann, 2022; Tschunkert et al., 2023).

The RSRTF is one of several pooled funds relevant to the UN Cooperation Framework, the Humanitarian Response Plan, UNMISS and the HDP nexus. Another fund is the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF), which manages humanitarian assistance and distributes pooled funds to L/NNGOs, focusing on education, health and nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and food security sectors (Tschunkert et al., 2023). Since its launch in 2012, it has received close to US \$1 billion, with the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway as the main contributors. In 2022, US \$50 million were paid into the Fund (UNDP, 2023a). It channels funds almost exclusively to humanitarian actors, although many of them have multiple mandates and are increasingly integrating resilience approaches and peacebuilding activities into their emergency response.

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The Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience (PfPRR) framework was launched in 2018 with the aim of restoring access to basic services, rebuilding trust in people and institutions, restoring productive capacity and expanding effective partnerships. Donors, UN entities and NGOs in South Sudan are working together on programmes that focus on strengthening the resilience of vulnerable people, communities, and institutions. The Partnership works in different areas across the country and emphasises local ownership, conflict sensitivity and flexibility (PfRR Secretariat, 2023). One of the pilot areas where a nexus programme has been implemented is Unity State, where it has reportedly been able to improve collaboration between UN agencies and NGOs as well as raise awareness of collective outcomes (Otim & CSRE, 2023).

Finally, in May 2021, the government of South Sudan was declared eligible for funding from the UN Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) for a period of five years. In that year, South Sudan became the largest beneficiary of the PBF, receiving US \$16 million. The Fund aims to support the implementation of the R-ARCSS and focuses on "strengthening national democratisation, justice and accountability processes, addressing conflict related to displacement and strengthening local peace and conflict prevention mechanisms" (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2022).

In addition to supporting pooled funds, bilateral donors aim to break down the silos of humanitarian assistance, development interventions and peacebuilding activities through more flexible funding. The German government, for example, provides funding through two ministries: The German Federal Foreign Office primarily funds humanitarian assistance. In 2020, South Sudan became one of the ten peace and nexus partner countries of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), shifting the focus towards transition assistance, development, and peacebuilding (BMZ, 2023a). One mechanism for strengthening the links between GFFO humanitarian funding and BMZ development funding is the 'chapeau approach', whereby humanitarian and development projects are funded separately by the GFFO and BMZ but work towards the same collective outcomes. At the time of writing, there are two such chapeau projects in South Sudan (Tschunkert et al., 2023).

The Limits of Localisation

While there has been some progress on flexible funding and localisation of aid, its impact is still limited. First, unearmarked pooled funding remains the exception. In fact, the vast majority of funds are still earmarked; between 2013 and 2020, this was 98 per cent (Tschunkert et al., 2023). Earmarked funding means that money can only be spent for a specific purpose and target group, preventing flexibility and coordination within and between organisations. For example, if funds are earmarked for a particular humanitarian crisis, such as flooding, they must be used for that crisis, leaving little room for manoeuvre in HDP nexus programming. In our interviews, the existing silo thinking with a strong focus on short-term humanitarian aid was criticised as one of the main challenges to the implementation of the HDP nexus approach. Moreover, the low share of pooled funds and core funding for L/NNGOs reinforces power imbalances in the aid system, whose architecture is based

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on unequal partnerships. Bilateral donors, UN agencies and international NGOs largely decide which regions and people to support and which crises to respond to, while L/NNGOs are often limited to being sub-contractors for programmes (Davies & Spencer, 2022; Robinson & CSRF, 2021). This leaves little room for L/NNGOs to get involved in decision-making processes but also to develop (or maintain) their own portfolio. To access funding, L/NNGOs need to respond to international donor requirements,

which often means focusing on one of the three components even though they may already have experience of bridging the three domains in their programming (Chan & Schmidlin, 2023; Tschunkert et al., 2023). It also risks a “homogenisation of civil society”, in which only those civil society organisations benefit from localisation that operate in similar ways than INGOs (Robinson & CSRF, 2021, p. 10).

Second, within the pooled funds, the transfer of funds and leadership responsibilities to L/NNGOs also remains limited. In 2019, only 2.4 per cent of the reported total humanitarian funding went directly to national and local NGOs, and this included pooled funds (Robinson & CSRF, 2021). Within the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund, for example, national NGOs and civil society organisations received only ten per cent of the funding between 2016 and 2020 (Tschunkert et al., 2023). The RSRTF fund provides specific support to L/NNGOs to promote localisation. RSRTF staff are trained to work with local partners and support them in the bidding process. However, this still refers to a one-way transfer of capacity (Tschunkert et al., 2023), reflecting a ‘White gaze’, in which international actors define capacity mostly based on ‘upward accountability’ to donors rather than ‘downward accountability’ to communities (Howe et al., 2019; Robinson & CSRF, 2021). Similarly, decision-making

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processes in the PfPRR programmes seem to remain in the hands of donors and international actors. Some of the implementing agencies have expressed concerns that the selection of areas is donor-driven rather than needs-based (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021), while Otim and CSRF (2023) observe that coordination remains hierarchical, with UN agencies in the lead, followed by INGOs and only then L/NNGOs. One reason why L/NNGOs continue to play a subordinate role in South Sudan’s aid system is

that donors and international actors often have limited confidence in the capacities of L/NNGOs and see a higher risk of corruption (Tschunkert et al., 2023). This shows that pooled funds per se cannot overcome these power imbalances. Instead, mutual trust and respect need to be built. This does not happen within a project cycle but takes time (Dijkzeul, 2021).

Third, it also points to a more fundamental problem with localisation, starting with the question of who or what ‘the local’ is. The IASC has defined local actors as either state or non-state actors that are engaged in aid, are headquartered and operate in their own aid-recipient country and are not affiliated with an international organisation (IASC, 2018). This definition includes local and national NGOs and is useful, or even necessary, to assess the progress of localisation, for example in terms of the shift of funding from international organisations to national and local organisations. However, the categorisation is less helpful in assessing the quality of the partnerships. First, the boundaries between international and local are often blurred: international organisations in South Sudan need local staff to implement their projects, especially in hard-to-reach areas, or they subcontract parts of their activities to L/NNGOs, who also bear the safety and security risks of implementing the programmes in conflict-affected and insecure areas (Robinson & CSRF, 2021). Second, the definition masks inequalities in access to funding. L/NNGOs are a heterogeneous group, ranging from faith-based organisations² to national organisations operating in different parts of the country, to grassroots organisations in a particular locality. While some organisations, especially those based in Juba, manage to access international funding, the latter group is often excluded from access to funding, despite working closely with communities. This particularly affects women’s grassroots organisations. This disparity is not necessarily related to the capacity of an organisation but often to its ability to network and its visibility (Moro et al., 2020; Robinson & CSRF, 2021; Tschunkert et al., 2023). Third, international actors are also part of the political economy of a place: In a protracted crisis context such as South Sudan, international organisations tend to be present in a particular locality for many years. They are embedded in the place in which they operate; corruption is, therefore, an issue for all humanitarian actors, and accountability and transparency must be part of every organisational policy and practice (Tschunkert et al., 2023). Beyond technical definitions of the local, therefore, there is a need to critically engage with the structural racism and inequalities inherent in the construction of international versus local organisations and what is associated with them (See Section III.2. of the Discussion Paper (Müller-Koné et al., 2004). If this is not done, localisation runs the risk of reproducing unequal partnerships rather than overcoming them.

There is a need to critically engage with the structural racism and inequalities inherent in the construction of international versus local organisations.

² \ For an analysis of the particular role of faith-based organisations and localisation in South Sudan, see Wilkinson et al., 2022.

Implementing the HDP Nexus Beyond the United Nations

Little Leeway for 'Local led' Initiatives

In South Sudan, the push for the HDP nexus has fostered diverse programmes by international and national L/NNGOs beyond the United Nations. In our interviews with staff of national NGOs and civil society organisations, the shift from the 'dual' to the 'triple nexus', that is the integration of peace into humanitarian and development activities, was largely perceived as positive or simply essential for meaningful action. The perceived need to integrate peace activities, the search for complementarity between the humanitarian, development and peace domains and donor requirements were cited as the main reasons for the increase in the number of programmes following an HDP nexus approach. However, interviewees acknowledged that there is a lack of experience in integrating the peace component. Some stated that working on peace was neither their core capacity nor their mandate, referring to the risk of being perceived as less neutral when engaging in peacebuilding activities. One strategy is to subcontract the peace activities to L/NNGOs, although collaboration between humanitarian and peacebuilding actors can be challenging. CSRF (2022) found that this is not only due to different mandates but also to limited geographical or temporal overlap. Indeed, many humanitarian actors do not have a full picture of peacebuilding actors and their activities in the locality where they are working.

Project design is often driven by donor requirements, with communities coming in at the implementation stage when there is little room to negotiate the form of their involvement and the framework of planned activities.

As with the RSRTF or PfPRR, NGOs mostly include peace activities in their resilience programmes, such as the USAID-funded Complementary Action for Resilience Building in South Sudan (CARB), the World Bank-funded Enhancing Community Resilience and Local Governance Project (ECRP) and other initiatives (Otim & CSRE, 2023). Most of these programmes focus on local communities. For example, as our interviews showed, community-based peace activities can include direct involvement in conflict resolution mechanisms, such as establishing or supporting

peace committees, or they can focus on community engagement that is intended to promote peace, such as sports events, community dialogue or counselling services (see also Norman & Mikhael, 2023). The study by Norman and Mikhael (2023) in northern Bahr El Ghazal showed that this can increase the overall resilience of communities to conflict, for example when peace committees prevent conflicts from escalating into violence.

However, a study published by the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility and Detcro Research and Advisory (2023) on "Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in South Sudan" reveals several shortcomings: First, a community-based approach usually does not mean that communities are involved in the entire project management cycle, from project design and planning to implementation and evaluation. Instead, project design is often driven by donor requirements, with communities coming in at the implementation stage when there is little room to negotiate the form of their involvement and the framework of planned activities. Second, siloed funding and short-term, sector-based projects often result in targeted community engagement that does not necessarily reflect the diverse and interrelated needs and priorities of communities. In the worst cases, this can lead to competing structures, for example where WASH and peace committees have been formed and trained in the same community with overlapping roles and responsibilities. Third, communities often lack the time, information, and resources to organise themselves and to engage with aid agencies on a equal footing, while accountability mechanisms remain weak. Fourth, there is the dilemma of how to deal with local government in aid projects.

International NGOs are often reluctant to engage with the government of South Sudan at various levels for the reasons outlined above. However, local authorities play an important role in communities, and this cannot be neglected but must be carefully analysed and taken into account (see also Hutton & CSRF, 2018; Norman & Mikhael, 2023). Finally, the lack of flexibility in programming is a major concern, especially in longer-term projects related to the HDP nexus, as the context and, therefore, the needs and priorities of communities are likely to change over the course of a project (CSRF & Detro, 2023).

In summary, unequal power relations exist not only between international organisations and national and local NGOs, but also between (I)NGOs and the 'local' communities in which they operate. Humanitarian organisations are aware of the importance of a bottom-up approach to the HDP nexus. Thinking about the HDP nexus from a community-based approach or even hyper-local approach (Norman & Mikhael, 2023) that focuses on the village or camp level is a necessary exercise and can serve as a first step in overcoming the unequal power relations that exist in the aid system. However, on the one hand, it is important to open up more spaces for 'local led' initiatives that involve communities in all stages of the HDP nexus programming, from planning to implementation and evaluation. On the other hand, it is important not to treat communities as homogeneous groups of people but to recognise that unequal power relations exist within communities (between genders, age groups, religions, social classes and political affiliations). A context and conflict analysis is needed that builds knowledge with local communities based on their concepts and understandings of key terms such as conflict, peace and resilience, the socio-spatial relationships between community members, and existing agendas for conflict resolution, peacebuilding and development within communities.

Unequal power relations exist not only between international organisations and national and local NGOs, but also between (I)NGOs and the 'local' communities in which they operate.

Conclusion

In our *Discussion Paper* (Müller-Koné et al., 2024), we have argued that HDP nexus thinking and the concepts associated with its implementation, such as collective outcomes and localisation, not only need a stronger focus on bottom-up approaches but that these will only be successful if approached from a decolonial

A decolonial approach to the HDP nexus requires international aid organisations to reflect on and acknowledge their own international positioning and biases.

perspective. Key findings for South Sudan first show that the HDP nexus has emerged as a top-down approach, driven by the UN system in collaboration with the transitional government of South Sudan. Although humanitarian actors have generally been much less critical of the United Nation's role within the HDP nexus than, for example, in Mali (see Haidara, 2024), it has raised questions of accountability in terms of cooperation with the government. Second, localisation in South Sudan has been mainly interpreted as a shift of resources to national and local actors, with limited success. The common interpretation is that local actors often lack capacity and have a higher risk of corruption. There is little reflection on the 'White gaze' of such an interpretation, which runs the risk of simply reproducing unequal power relations rather than overcoming them. Third, localisation has less to do with 'local led' initiatives or agenda-setting in HDP nexus programming. Bottom-up approaches by (I)NGOs still fail to effectively integrate local understandings and demands into programming and implementation.

This *Spotlight Paper* on South Sudan, just like the other *Spotlight Papers* on Mali and Iraq that are published in parallel, highlights the limitations of the HDP nexus approach and its claim for localisation in South Sudan. The three *Spotlight Papers* identify the issues that need to be addressed from a decolonial perspective for the HDP nexus to work in building peace from the bottom up and the limits of an effective HDP nexus approach. While some progress can be seen in the context of Mali and South Sudan, the priority setting of national and local actors remains largely unaddressed in localisation approaches. Moreover, analysis from a

This Paper highlights the limitations of the HDP nexus approach and its claim for localisation ... as the priority setting of national and local actors remains largely unaddressed.

decolonial perspective allows us to understand why HDP implementation has largely failed to be bottom-up. Power imbalances between donor institutions, INGOs and L/NNGOs, as well as structural racism prevailing in the aid system, explain why localisation efforts remain limited and partnerships are still based on unequal terms. Furthermore, 'local led' initiatives are still minimal. The HDP nexus therefore needs not only more flexible funding from donors and support for national and local organisations but also better community involvement throughout the entire project management cycle. A decolonial perspective prioritises the visions and capacities of local people, more 'local led' partnerships and 'local owned' programming. In practice, as our main study argues (Müller-Koné et al., 2024), a decolonial approach to the HDP nexus requires international aid organisations to reflect on and acknowledge their own international positioning and biases with a view to decolonising knowledge production and organisational structures.

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