

bicc report

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How can the Humanitarian– Development– Peace Nexus Work from the Bottom Up?

**A Discussion Paper on
Implementation Challenges
from a Decolonial Perspective.
Insights from Iraq, Mali and
South Sudan**

The HDP nexus approach has so far failed to deliver on the promise of a bottom-up approach. We discuss why.

A localisation approach runs the risk of reproducing existing power imbalances rather than overcoming them.

The research findings show that peace activities can be controversial or too politically sensitive to be implemented at all.

SUMMARY

The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus is designed to render humanitarian responses to populations in need more sustainable by better linking the three fields of H, D and P activities and addressing the root causes of conflicts. This “New Way of Working” decided at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was not only a response to protracted, multiple crises but also a response to a widespread popular discontent with the existing system of humanitarian aid. Accordingly, calls to decolonise aid have emerged in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding fields, criticising power imbalances and structural racisms that condition relations between aid actors from the global North and the global South. In this Discussion Paper, we use decolonial critique to gain insights into how the HDP approach works in theory and in practice.

Based on a literature review and qualitative empirical research in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan, we argue that the power imbalances addressed by the decolonial movement pose a particular challenge for the HDP nexus, as the HDP approach intervenes in local conflicts and their inherent power dynamics by including peace activities. The guiding question for this Paper is: **How can the HDP approach work from the bottom up?** To answer this question, we examine the extent to which the HDP nexus has so far been implemented as a bottom-up approach and what new ways forward a decolonial perspective offers.

While in this Discussion Paper, we draw on our research findings as examples, three separate *Spotlight Papers* on the HDP nexus accompany this Paper to provide an in-depth analysis for each country.

Our three key findings are:

- \ The HDP nexus approach has so far failed to deliver on the promise of a bottom-up approach. Instead, our findings from the three country cases of Iraq, South Sudan and Mali show that it is largely being implemented from the top down.
- \ A localisation approach runs the risk of reproducing existing power imbalances rather than overcoming them. For example, localisation as promoted by international aid agencies since the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 still leaves little decision-making power and influence over project design with local organisations and communities.
- \ The main HDP nexus guidance documents suggest that peacebuilding activities should be apolitical. However, the empirical research findings from the country cases show that peace activities can be controversial, such as the stabilisation policies of international military missions in Mali, or too politically sensitive to be implemented at all, as seen in Iraq.

We conclude that a bottom-up approach to the HDP nexus is fraught with difficulties within the current humanitarian system and requires a change of mindset to succeed. This is not to say that the entire HDP nexus does not work. Rather, our argument goes in the opposite direction: By adopting a decolonial lens that makes power imbalances more visible, the HDP nexus offers a chance to uncover and reflect on the political positioning of international humanitarian actors in their respective contexts of intervention. Only when such power imbalances are reflected in day-to-day aid operations can they be addressed and the influence of local actors on project design be increased.

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We would like to thank the researchers and research assistants in Mali, Iraq and South Sudan for their valuable contributions in the phase of research.

The project partners at International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) for facilitating the research in the three countries and for providing feedback on preliminary research findings and on earlier versions of this Discussion Paper. Colleagues at BICC for their valuable input and review. Special thanks go to Elvan Isikozlu for her editorial contributions, Benjamin Etzold, Carina Schlüsing, Marc von Boemcken and Conrad Schetter for feedback on earlier versions, Heike Webb for copyediting and layout, Jason Krämer for his help with graphics and the bibliography, and Ben Buchenau and Nele Kerndt for the maps and charts.

This *Discussion Paper* has been facilitated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) as part of the research project 'How can the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus succeed? NGOs between humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding'. All views expressed in this *Paper* are the sole responsibility of the authors and should not be attributed to BMZ or any other institution or person.

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Introduction

The humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus is designed to make humanitarian responses more sustainable for populations in need by better linking the three fields of H, D and P activities and addressing the root causes of conflicts. The need for a nexus approach is often justified by the fact that humanitarian and development organisations face increasingly complex and protracted humanitarian crises (Development Initiatives, 2023, p. 12; Macrae, 2019). Disasters, climate change, war and armed conflict, internal and international displacement, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and international food price hikes characterise these crises and make effective responses a challenging endeavour. The number of crises that received an internationally-led response increased from 16 in 2005 to 34 in 2019, and their average duration increased from 5.4 to 9.5 years (Böttcher & Wittkowsky, 2021; Macrae, 2019).¹ Protracted crises of mass displacement last on average 17 years (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2016). Moreover, 80 per cent of humanitarian aid is spent in conflict contexts (Development Initiatives, 2023, p. 22; United Nations, 2016, p. 7). Humanitarian assistance in protracted crises reaches its limits as interventions and funding need to be sustained for years on end.

It is against this background that the United Nations developed the HDP nexus as a concept and adopted it as a "New Way of Working" at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016). However, a closer re-reading of the report on the three-year consultation process that the United Nations conducted ahead of the 2016 Summit reveals that the "New Way of Working" was not only a response to protracted, multiple crises but also a response to widespread popular dissatisfaction with the existing system of humanitarian aid (DuBois, 2020). The UN Secretary General's report to the 2016 Summit states:

There is considerable frustration with the international aid architecture. It is seen as outdated and resistant to change, fragmented and uncommitted to working collaboratively, and too dominated by the interests and funding of a few countries. "(...) "There is frustration among men, women, young people and children in crises, who feel that their voices are not heard, their capabilities are not recognized, their needs are not being met and their hopes for a peaceful, self-sufficient future are not being realized (United Nations, 2016, p. 4).

The consultation reached over 23,000 people in 153 countries. The results, therefore, lend weight to the criticism of the aid sector's top-down approach, which many feel does not take sufficient account of local needs and capacities. Accordingly, (I)NGOs, as well as the official guidance on the HDP nexus call for strengthening a bottom-up approach and for localisation to be given priority: Wherever possible, existing local state and non-state structures should be used and "capacitated" (or: their "capacities" "strengthened") instead of building parallel structures (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019). Funds ought to be paid as often as possible to local and national authorities, institutions and NGOs (OECD, 2019; Staes, 2021).

Since 2020, in parallel and linked to the HDP debate, (I)NGOs in the aid sector have been challenged from within the sector to decolonise aid (Aloudat & Khan, 2022; Peace Direct, 2021). These critiques argue for the need to move beyond a bottom-up approach and are sometimes outright critical of localisation as currently practised by international aid agencies (Mathews, 2022; Shuayb, 2022). Instead, the decolonial perspective aims to address the power imbalances inherent in the international aid system, which stem from the colonial past and which entrench structural racism and tend to favour international actors to the detriment of local actors, be they aid organisations or beneficiaries.

This fundamental critique of humanitarian and development aid in its current form emerged from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020.² The debate was taken up in the aid sector, where peace (Schirch, 2022), humanitarian (Aloudat, 2020; Aloudat & Khan, 2022) and development (Dombrowski, 2022; Duvisac, 2022) organisations debated the need for decolonial reform. Peace Direct and the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace (Adeso) held an online consultation in November 2020 with over 150 people from the development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding sectors on how to 'decolonise aid' (Peace

¹ \ In 2022, three-quarters of all people in need of humanitarian assistance experienced at least two dimensions of crisis—conflict, environmental or socio-economic crises. More than 80 per cent of people receiving aid lived in a protracted crisis of five years or more (Development Initiatives, 2023, p. 12).

² \ BLM reached a peak of protests after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020. It exposes and works to overcome racism and police brutality against black people, seeking equal treatment and advocating for justice.

Direct, 2021a). In parallel, the call for decolonial reform has been adopted in some humanitarian and development organisations, such as Doctors without Borders (MSF) (Aloudat, 2020).

We argue that the power imbalances addressed by the decolonial movement pose a particular challenge for the HDP nexus, as the HDP approach intervenes in local conflicts and their inherent power dynamics by including peace activities. Therefore, our aim is to use decolonial critique in this Discussion Paper to gain insights into how the HDP approach works in theory and in practice. The guiding question for this Paper is: **How can the HDP approach work from the bottom up?** To answer this question, we examine the extent to which the HDP nexus has so far been implemented as a bottom-up approach and what new ways forward a decolonial perspective offers.

This Paper is intended for readers interested in and/or working with the HDP nexus approach. It combines insights from a comprehensive review of grey literature on the HDP approach and from qualitative empirical research conducted in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan in 2022 and 2023. The three countries have very complex conflict environments, and the HDP approach faces different challenges: In Iraq, the war has officially ended, but peace activities are particularly difficult to implement due to competing visions of territorial control and peace at the local and national levels. In Mali, the popular 'anti-colonial' resistance to the presence of the French Army and MINUSMA—two of the first structures to implement the HDP nexus—has made closer cooperation between H, D and P actors particularly sensitive. In South Sudan, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on Resolving Conflict has advanced the HDP agenda, but while most stakeholders see potential in implementing activities along the nexus, ongoing localised conflicts, siloed funding and reservations towards local and national NGOs pose challenges to a bottom-up approach. While in this Discussion Paper, we draw on our research findings as examples, three separate spotlight papers on the HDP nexus accompany this Paper to provide an in-depth analysis for each country (see Box below).

We conclude that a bottom-up approach to the HDP nexus is fraught with difficulties within the current humanitarian system and requires a change of mindset to succeed. This is not to say that the entire HDP nexus does not work. Rather, our argument goes in the opposite direction: By adopting a decolonial lens that makes power imbalances more visible, the HDP nexus offers a chance to uncover and reflect on the political positioning of international humanitarian actors in their respective contexts of intervention. Only when such power imbalances are reflected in day-to-day aid operations can they be addressed and the influence of local actors on project design be increased.

Country Cases

Details on the country cases can be found in the Country *Spotlights*: The *Spotlights* outline 1) when and under what conditions the HDP nexus was introduced in each country, 2) the extent to which the nexus is reflected in the main frameworks envisaged at the country level, such as the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), the Common Country Analysis (CCA) and associated humanitarian response as well as national development plans and 3) how UN agencies and (I)NGOs have implemented the HDP nexus there.

This Discussion Paper is structured as follows: First, we present findings on how the HDP nexus has been applied to date, including some of the lessons learned from the general literature review and the empirical case study research ([Background on the HDP Nexus](#)). From this, we draw insights into the obstacles to implementing the HDP nexus from a decolonial perspective, with particular attention to the concepts of localisation and peace ([A Decolonial Perspective on the Challenges of Implementing the HDP Nexus](#)). In the [Conclusions](#), we highlight the main avenues for change that a decolonial perspective might offer to advance the HDP nexus and improve the situation of people in multiple crisis contexts.

Methodology

This Discussion Paper is based on an extensive literature review and semi-structured interviews with local and international NGO staff in Mali, Iraq and South Sudan in 2022 and 2023. We conducted these interviews as part of the BICC 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). As part of this project, we are working with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) as three INGOs whose staff share their insights into the design and implementation of the HDP nexus with us as researchers.

The research team remains independent. To ensure the safety and security of local individuals interviewed and the staff of the INGOs and cooperating local NGOs, all interview data is anonymised, and primary data is not shared with the partners, funder or otherwise outside the research team.

The IRC, MI and WHH facilitate our access to local communities in Mali, Iraq and South Sudan for research. Within local communities, we analyse local actors' conceptions of 'conflict', 'conflict resolution', 'reconciliation' or 'peace' to understand how these concepts are currently being taken into consideration or being addressed by international organisations attempting to implement an HDP nexus approach. In this way, our project seeks to understand how the HDP approach can (or cannot) be implemented and what constitutes "successful" HDP implementation according to the experiences and perspectives of local communities.

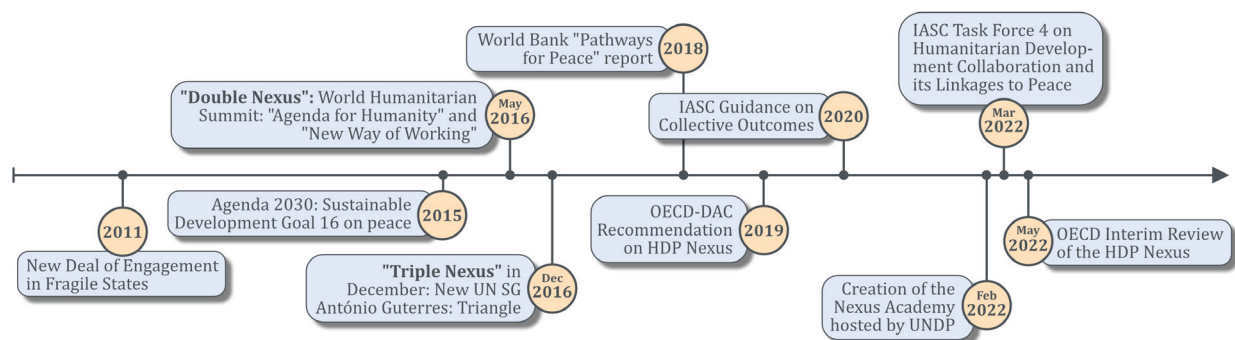
We focus on Mali, Iraq and South Sudan because local communities in all three countries have suffered from and are facing complex, protracted (more than five years) crises. At the same time, IRC, MI and WHH have already started to implement the HDP approach in these countries. At the time of writing, the BICC project team has conducted about 60 interviews with (I)NGO staff in three localities per country. We have also conducted about 120 interviews with residents from different social strata, age groups, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious beliefs and with a special focus on gender.

How can the HDP Approach Work from the Bottom Up?

Background on the HDP Nexus

At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, the largest humanitarian donors and NGOs signed the “Grand Bargain” to contribute to localisation and peace, increase aid effectiveness and efficiency and the “New Way of Working” (NWW), which aims at internal reforms to implement the HDP approach within the UN system. The “Agenda for Humanity” prepared by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the WHS 2016 established the “Double Nexus” to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development. This section presents an overview of the evolution of the HDP nexus concept and the main strengths and shortcomings of its implementation as a bottom-up approach that have been identified so far.

Figure 1: Timeline of the HDP Nexus



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Emergence of the HDP Nexus as a UN-driven Approach and Key Concepts

The **'Double Nexus'** built on discussions in previous decades about **linking relief, rehabilitation and development** (LRRD) or sustainable humanitarian aid. These discussions focussed first on how to improve the sequencing of humanitarian and development aid in a *continuum*, i.e. to smoothen the transition between the two, and later on how to coordinate simultaneous interventions of both in a *contiguum*, a neologism to express the idea of simultaneity. The New Way of Working adopted at the 2016 WHS went one step further by introducing the goal of developing collective outcomes that could guide the operations of humanitarian and development organisations. All operations were now geared towards improving the plight of people in crisis situations, in the context of the Agenda 2030/ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In December 2016, in his inaugural speech, UN Secretary-General António Guterres established the **'Triple Nexus'** to stress the importance of including peacebuilding in a triangle of humanitarian, development and peace work. The HDP nexus is closely linked to earlier discussions on **whole-of-government**, integrated approaches, human security and stabilisation (Böttcher & Wittkowsky, 2021). The HDP nexus approach implies that actors from the three sectors should work together based on their comparative strengths (for example, short-term, rapid emergency response versus long-term infrastructure-building) and direct their activities towards **collective outcomes through coordination**. According to the 2019 OECD Guidance, aid agencies are expected to formulate common goals that imply increased exchange, mutual understanding and **learning**, and, ultimately, a cultural shift for all involved to overcome siloed practices and thinking. In a crisis situation, development and peace-building activities should start as early as possible.

Key Documents on the HDP Nexus

General guidance and reviews:

- \ [OECD-DAC \(2019\): Recommendations on the HDP Nexus](#)
- \ [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(2021\): Mapping Good Practice of HDP Nexus implementation](#)
- \ [OECD \(2022\): The HDP Nexus Interim Progress Review](#)

On Peace:

- \ ASC (2022): [Mapping and analysis of tools and guidance on the H-P linkages in the HDP-nexus](#)
- \ UNSDG (2022): [Good practice note: Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace:](#)

Country frameworks (UN Level):

- \ [United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework \(UNSDCF\)](#)
- \ [Common Country Analysis \(CCA\)](#)

This requires **financial and organisational flexibility** and multi-year funding allocations. Based on the Guidance, actors should plan and work in a **context-specific** manner and uphold the **humanitarian principles** of neutrality, independence and impartiality (Böttcher & Wittkowsky, 2021; OECD, 2019).

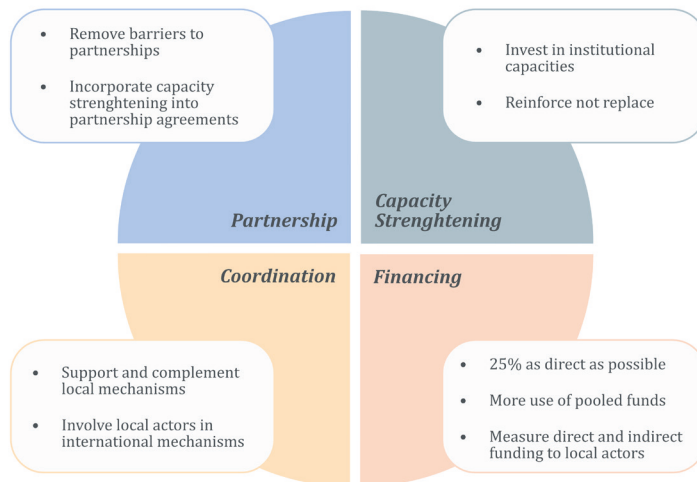
One of the key tenets of the HDP nexus is that aid agencies will adopt a **bottom-up approach** that prioritises local perspectives and builds on closer cooperation with local partners by strengthening the linkages between humanitarian, development and peace activities. The global discussion on **localisation** in the context of the HDP nexus emphasises that more funding should be channelled through local implementing partners, who are meant to be involved "in humanitarian coordination structures" (International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), 2018, p. 2; Mathews, 2022). The 2016 'Grand Bargain' committed donors and aid organisations to provide 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local and national actors by 2020, along with more unearmarked money and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response (Barakat & Milton, 2020, p. 149). The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates humanitarian affairs and Grand Bargain commitments, has defined local actors as either state or non-state actors that are engaged in relief work, headquartered and operating in their own aid-recipient country and not affiliated with an international organisation (IASC, 2018). However, the definition finally adopted includes a clause which allows country offices of INGOs to qualify as 'local', which waters down the 25 per cent funding commitment (Peace Direct, 2021, p. 14).

Collective Outcomes and Operational Preconditions for the HDP Nexus

Country-specific **collective outcomes** are commonly agreed results among aid organisations to be achieved over a period of three to five years (similar time horizons to stabilisation policies, to "address and reduce people's unmet needs, risks and vulnerabilities, increasing their resilience and addressing the root causes of conflict" (OECD, 2019, p. 7).

Operational preconditions for an HDP nexus approach mentioned in official guidance documents are:

- \ Regular exchange, shared data, **joint analyses, coordinated planning** within the nexus;
- \ Put **people at the centre**, ensuring that activities **do no harm** and are conflict and **gender sensitive**;
- \ Adapted financial instruments;
- \ Sufficient **flexibility** to respond to crisis contexts;
- \ **Learning**: Monitoring and evaluation.

Figure 2: Localisation in the HDP Agenda

Source: Adapted from ICVA, 2018, p. 2; Design: Ben Buchenau \ BICC.

rights of people affected by crisis, and reduce need, risk and vulnerability in the short-, medium- and the long-term, while avoiding negative consequences on conflict dynamics, recognizing that such actions may also have a greater indirect positive impact, including on peace (2020, p. 4).

To achieve this goal, the IASC emphasises that the focus of peace activities should be on transforming relationships within communities and between individuals and the state into relationships of trust and social cohesion. This includes local, community-based measures that encourage peaceful collaboration and conflict management and resolution but also increasing state accountability (e.g. equal access to resources, inclusive government) ("**little p**"). This may, but does not necessarily, need to be complemented by larger, country-wide measures, such as political dialogue, UN peacekeeping and special political missions ("**big P**") (IASC, 2020, pp. 7–8, 2022, p. 7).

There is controversy over whether the "big P" should also include stabilisation measures and military means, as in the EU approach. While many humanitarian organisations tend to focus on the "little p" as indicated by the IASC, other state and supra-state actors, such as Germany and the European Union, and international organisations, such as the OECD, cover the entire peacebuilding spectrum, including "hard security" (civilian and military) stabilisation measures (Angelini & Brown, 2023; Böttcher & Wittkowsky, 2021, p. 24; Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 4). The European civil society platforms VOICE and EPLO have warned against the "instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid for political purposes" (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE), 2019). and emphasised that there are "**competing visions** of what the peace component should be about" and that it is "important to ensure that it relates to peacebuilding and that it is not synonymous with military instruments and the use of military force, as some actors are rightly worried about" (quote in Redvers & Parker, 2020).

Many humanitarian NGOs have been critical of earlier attempts to make humanitarian aid more sustainable or more directly concerned with promoting peace, such as LRRD and the whole-of-government approaches (Böttcher & Wittkowsky, 2021). Apart from critical comments on nexus efforts by (inter-)governmental organisations (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE), 2019), various NGOs are already trying to develop their own HDP nexus approach (ActionAid UK, 2022; CARITAS International, 2022; de Wolf & Wilkinson, 2019; Kittaneh & Stolk, 2018; Oxfam, 2019; World Vision, 2020).

The United Nations was, and continues to be, the starting point and main driving force behind the HDP nexus approach. The IASC has since published guidelines for practitioners on how to create country-specific collective outcomes and how to include peace. **Peace** activities within the HDP nexus are the least conceptualised (Angelini & Brown, 2023). The IASC, therefore, sought to clarify the peace component of the HDP nexus by introducing a distinction between "little p" and "big P" activities. As a framework for conceptualising the peace component of the HDP nexus, IASC argues that for all three H, D and P components, the *common goal is to restore the safety, dignity and integrity, protect the*

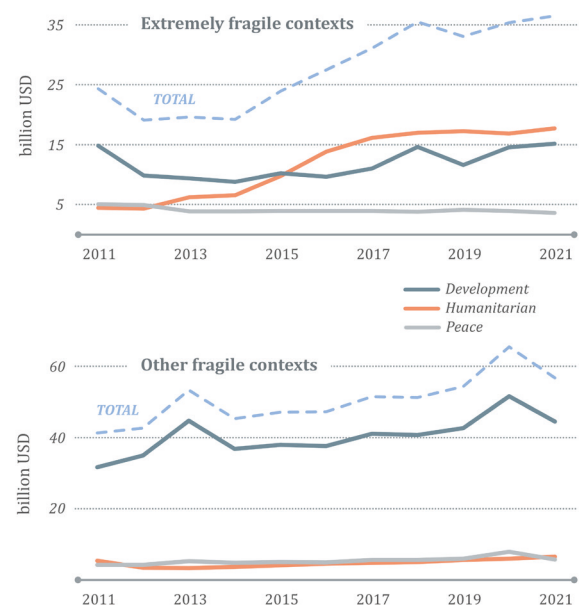
Instituting the HDP Nexus

In 2019, the **OECD-DAC** adopted recommendations on funding for the HDP nexus, which were signed by seven UN entities (UNDP, UN Habitat, WFP, IOM, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR) and the UN Secretariat by the end of 2021. To set collective outcomes per country, **UN organisations** have been asked since 2016 to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), a Common Country Analysis (CCA) and its Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework. They are meant to be aligned with the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and national development strategies of the countries concerned.

The **World Bank** has used its State and Peacebuilding Fund to finance projects that implement the HDP approach and has partnered with UN institutions to fund support in crisis situations³ (Center on International Cooperation (CIC), 2019) In Germany, the German Development Ministry (BMZ) and the Federal Foreign Office decided to bridge their siloed funding structure (development cooperation with BMZ, humanitarian aid with Foreign Office) by instituting a nexus-chapeau approach for NGOs in 2019. NGOs can now apply with two complementary projects for humanitarian aid with the Foreign Office and Transitional Assistance (*Übergangshilfe*) with BMZ and formulate common goals. The German government initially promoted the chapeau approach to link humanitarian and development activities but has increasingly used it to promote the HDP nexus and integrate peacebuilding.

In **financial terms**, while development aid from OECD countries to fragile contexts has increased substantially over the past fifteen years (US \$61.9 billion⁴ or 60 per cent of total ODA in 2020 (OECD, 2022b), humanitarian assistance has only increased substantially in extremely fragile contexts. In fragile contexts, 63 per cent of gross bilateral ODA from OECD DAC members went to the development pillar of the HDP nexus, 25 per cent to humanitarian objectives and 12 per cent to peace objectives. It is of particular concern that from 2010 to 2020, DAC members' **aid to peace objectives** in fragile contexts declined by 19 per cent (OECD, 2022b). These OECD statistics seem to show the limits of efforts to expand development and civil peacebuilding activities in extremely fragile contexts, assuming that they reflect the fact that the security situation and the presence of competing armed forces do not allow for development and peacebuilding activities (see Figure 3). Further research is needed to clarify whether this was indeed the case for those countries that experienced an increase in humanitarian funding relative to development and peacebuilding funding.

Figure 3: Financial Flows of ODA to Fragile and Conflict-affected Countries

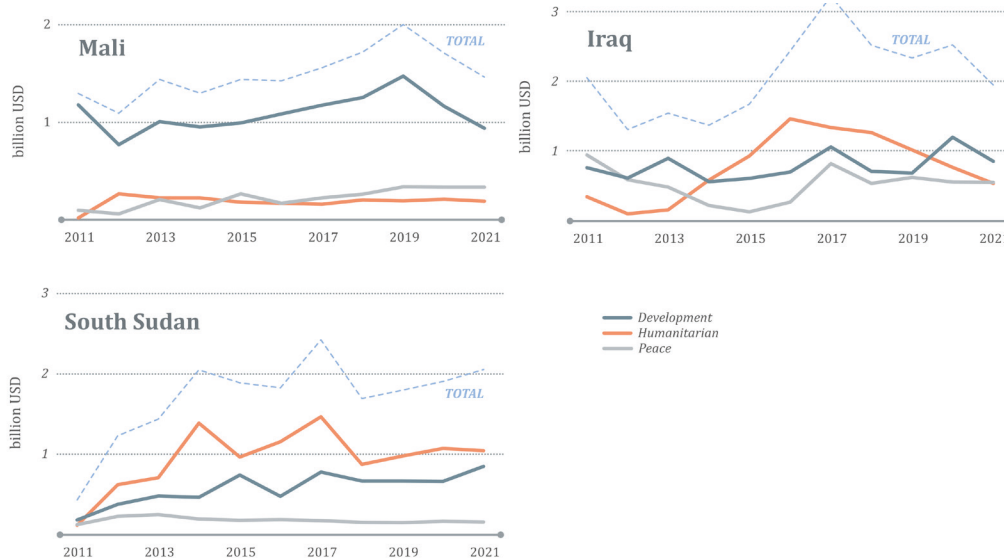


Note: The term "extremely fragile contexts" refers to the OECD's multidimensional fragility framework, which evaluates fragility using six dimensions with eight to ten indicators each. A total of 57 indicators are used to calculate an overall fragility score. If this score is lower than -2.85, the context is classified as "extremely fragile". "Other fragile contexts" include all fragile contexts except of these classified as "extremely fragile". ©BICC, 2024; Design: Jason Krämer, Ben Buchenau, BICC. Adapted from OECD States of Fragility, 2022, Figure 2.1. Data sources: OECD, 2022b.

³ \ In Yemen, for example, the World Bank channelled more than US \$1 billion in emergency funding through various UN agencies between 2014 and 2017 during critical rounds of peace negotiations and in response to the humanitarian crisis.

⁴ \ Aid from OECD countries represents two-thirds of all aid recorded: The volume of aid from all donors to fragile contexts in 2020 stood at US \$91.4 billion.

Figure 4: Financial Flows of ODA to South Sudan, Mali and Iraq



Note: The three categories "humanitarian", "peace" and "development" have been derived from the Selection "Sector" of the CRS database. The category "humanitarian" includes the Sector "700: VIII. Humanitarian Aid", the category "peace" includes Sector "150: Government & Civil Society". The category "development" includes all sectors except those included in the two categories "humanitarian" and "peace" and Sectors "910: Administrative Costs of Donors", "930: Refugees in Donor Countries" and "Unallocated/ Unspecified". The financial flows include bilateral donations of OECD and non-OECD countries as well as multilateral funding lines. © BICC, 2024; Design: Jason Krämer, Ben Buchenau, BICC. Data source: OECD, 2022b.

The low levels of funding for civil peace activities apply to different contexts, as can be seen from aid flows to Mali, Iraq and South Sudan, the contexts under study here (see Figure 4). In extremely fragile contexts, such as South Sudan and Iraq, it would be expected that funding for peacebuilding activities was lower than humanitarian funding, and this is the case. In Mali, which is classified by the OECD as (not extremely) 'fragile', peace funding is not significantly lower than humanitarian funding, and development funding is much higher than humanitarian funding, as would be expected in this context.

Challenges to HDP Implementation Identified by Institutional Reviews

Reviews by the CIC (2019), IASC (2021) and OECD (2022a) on the implementation of the HDP nexus show that **some progress** has been made towards **joint analyses and planning** at the country level (see Table 1), with the strengthening of UN Resident Coordinators and, in some cases, some steps towards programmatic action with shared objectives, such as linking humanitarian aid and local governance in Somalia. The United Nations strengthened the role of Resident Coordinators as HDP coordinators in-country, overseen by the newly created Development Coordinator Office in New York. However, many collective outcomes are seen as "too generic" and hardly contributing towards "building national capacity to drive sustainable outcomes in the medium term" (CIC, 2019, p. ix).

Key constraints to achieving collective outcomes identified in the reviews are the **institutional silos** within bilateral donor governments (such as humanitarian aid in the German Foreign Office and development cooperation in the BMZ) and the **geographical separation** of humanitarian and development funding within affected countries (CIC, 2019).

HDP Coordination Architecture at UN-level

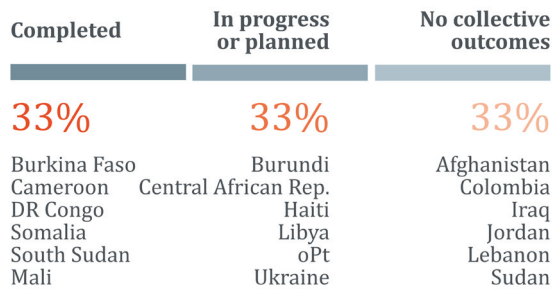
DCO: Development Coordinator Office → based in New York

RCO: Resident Coordinator Office → based in each country, five people per country

+ additional positions from other donors

Source: <https://un-dco.org/>

Figure 5: Collective Outcomes in NWW Pilot Countries, Mali and South Sudan as of 2023



©BICC, 2024; Layout: Ben Buchenau; Data sources: IASC, 2021, p. 3; own research for Mali and South Sudan.

Despite adaptations (humanitarian aid being programmed over several years and development aid working more independently of states), the **structural challenge** remains that humanitarian and development aid are funded and delivered through parallel institutions and different coordination and planning systems (Macrae, 2019). **Coordination all too often takes place in silos** with stronger coordination mechanisms on the humanitarian side than on the development side. It is worth noting that while coordination between organisations can be challenging, coordination within organisations/agencies (e.g. within EU institutions) can be just as complex.

Overall, triple nexus coordination across sectors remains a challenge. While Table 1 shows the existence of partnerships for HDP coordination, Figure 5 shows that, of the countries listed, in one-third of cases, national governments, UN agencies and INGOs have not yet agreed on collective outcomes. By comparison, in another third of cases, collective outcomes are planned or in progress, while in the remaining 33 per cent they have been completed. However, there is currently little insight available into how such collective outcomes are actually negotiated.

Table 1: HDP Pilot Countries and Programmes*

Country	New Way of Working**	European Union	Transitional Development Assistance (BMZ)***	BMZ Nexus and Peace Partnerships****
Afghanistan	2020	2020	-	2020
Burkina Faso	2017	2017	-	-
Burundi	2021	-	-	-
Cameroon	2019	-	-	-
Central African Republic	2020	2020	-	-
Chad	2017	2020	2018	2020
Colombia	2020	-	-	-
DR Congo	2019	-	2018	2020
Ethiopia	2018	-	-	-
Haiti	2021	2015	-	-
Iraq	2021	2021	2018	2020
Jordan	2016	-	-	-
DR Congo	2019	-	2018	2020
Ethiopia	2018	-	-	-
Haiti	2021	2015	-	-

Country	New Way of Working**	EU	Transitional Development Assistance (BMZ)***	BMZ Nexus and Peace Partnerships****
Iraq	2021	2021	2018	2020
Jordan	2016	-	-	-
Lebanon	2017	2017	2018	-
Libya	2019	-	-	2020
Mali	-	-	2018	-
Mauritania	2018	-	-	-
Mozambique	-	not started	-	-
Myanmar	2020	2020	2018	-
Nigeria	2018	2017	2018	-
Occupied Palestinian Territories	2016	-	2018	-
Philippines	-	not started	-	-
Somalia	2020	-	2018	2020
South Sudan	-	-	2018	2020
Sudan	2019	2019	2018	2020
Syria	-	-	2018	2020
Uganda	-	2018	-	-
Ukraine	2017	-	-	-
Yemen	2016	2016	-	2020

Sources: BMZ, 2020, 2023; OECD, 2022a. Notes: * South Sudan, Syria and Mali are no pilot countries on the international agenda, while they are focus countries of the BMZ; ** OECD, 2022a: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2f620ca5-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/2f620ca5-en&csp_=bbe432f9f3ae5d9779363490e6c9a85c&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book; *** The years represent the starting date of the strategic partnerships with focus countries under the latest BMZ strategy for Transitional Development Assistance; **** The years represent the starting date of the nexus partnerships (<https://www.bmz.de/de/service/lexikon/nexus-und-friedenspartner-59952>)

Financing

The UN system and bilateral donors have begun to **adapt their financial processes** and instruments to support nexus approaches, "though these are sometimes relatively siloed" and "the financing strategies envisaged by the DAC Recommendation are still largely missing" (OECD, 2022a). Although multi-year humanitarian funding is becoming more common, the limitation remains that multi-year sometimes just means multiple annual budgets with no flexibility across fiscal years (Alcayna, 2019, p. 33; CIC, 2019).

Localisation

There has hardly been any progress in the area of **localisation**: Only 1.2 per cent of humanitarian aid provided in 2022 went directly to national or local actors (Development Initiatives, 2023, p. 22). While the majority of humanitarian assistance in fragile contexts—around 80 per cent—is channelled through the multilateral system, the majority of development assistance in these contexts—77 per cent—is based on bilateral mechanisms (OECD, 2019). This means that a significant proportion (US \$13.8 billion of the US \$61.9 billion total ODA to fragile contexts in 2020) is channelled through national governments (one per cent through subnational governments and about five per cent to local NGOs). In extremely fragile contexts, however, such localised ODA is usually not the case (OECD, 2022b).

The OECD recognises that it is high time to engage more actors beyond the United Nations and OECD in the HDP nexus (OECD, 2022a). The question the United Nations and OECD need to ask is how to work with different international and local organisations amidst all the challenges of doing so. The challenges of developing collective outcomes, providing flexible funding mechanisms, promoting localisation and integrating peace activities illustrate the practical problems of the HDP nexus concept.

However, in the next section, we argue that the discrepancy between the theoretical concept and its implementation in practice also points to a more fundamental problem of the humanitarian system: that it is still characterised by colonial continuities that have led to power imbalances in the provision of humanitarian assistance, development interventions and peace activities.

A Decolonial Perspective on the Challenges of Implementing the HDP Nexus

The discussion on linking humanitarian assistance and development activities with peacebuilding has reopened a debate on the political positioning of humanitarian actors and development organisations alike. We argue that the question of how integrating peacebuilding can contribute to a more sustainable humanitarian response and development intervention can only be answered by reflecting on and exposing the power imbalances that exist in the system. In this section, we will draw on the examples of Iraq, Mali and South Sudan to highlight the challenges of implementing the HDP nexus from a decolonial perspective. After introducing the main tenets of the decolonial critique, we will analyse in the following sections how the various implementation challenges mentioned above relate to it. Building on this, we explore in depth how this critique requires a rethinking of the concepts of localisation and peace in the HDP debate.

Decolonial critique has shown how socio-economic and political structures, practices, values and attitudes in the aid sector that stem from the colonial past persist to this day. This is referred to as the coloniality⁵ of aid, which is seen to reflect an alleged superiority of those from the global North over those from the global South, even within the aid sector (cf. Buckley-Zistel & Koloma Beck, 2022; Duvisac, 2022; Quijano & Ennis, 2000). In short, the international aid system is seen as reflecting a staggering inequality in which the interests and priorities of the global North dominate those of the global South (Aloudat & Khan, 2022; International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) et al., 2022).

'Decolonise aid' movements thus critique a structural racism of the aid system that is expressed in a particular use of language. Terms that have become key to a sustainable response, such as 'capacity-building' reflect structural inequalities, with international organisations defining who lacks what kind of capacity. It, therefore, tends to refer to a lack of capacity in certain concepts or methods needed to deliver aid but not, for example, the ability of international actors to speak the language of the communities or to understand the context and history in which the organisation is working. As a result, capacity-building is a term used for local staff, NGOs and communities in countries of the global South, while organisations from the global North are usually the holders of capacity and the providers of capacity-building.

Similarly, referring to international staff as 'field experts' perpetuates images of local communities in the global South as lacking skills and 'uncivilised' rather than recognising professional expertise and enacting collaboration and solidarity. This language reflects a 'White gaze' mentality, rooted in colonialism, which sees "White Western practitioners not merely as experts, but as neutral actors in all contexts", whereas local practitioners are perceived as not neutral and thus "unable to provide services for all" (Peace Direct, 2021, p. 17). In practice, structural racism is seen in the funding opportunities for programmes and research which favour a relatively small number of mostly international NGOs with pre-existing relationships with donors over local NGOs (ISS et al., 2022; Peace Direct, 2021). 'Local' humanitarian actors are largely invisible in media reporting

⁵ \ Decolonial theory distinguishes between coloniality and colonialism. It argues that colonial relations continue to shape and ground our present-day political, economic, social and knowledge systems; this is termed 'coloniality' (Duvisac, 2022, p. 2).

on crises and disadvantaged in terms of funding opportunities (Aloudat & Khan, 2022). Structural racism is also evident in the unequal treatment by INGOs of international staff (from the North) and local staff from the South (Peace Direct, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). This unequal treatment applies to the difference in salaries for the same positions and to deployment in insecure areas.

For this reason, some have criticised the humanitarian principle of neutrality as a fiction that reinforces a superiority–inferiority relationship between UN agencies and (I)NGOs, which are mostly based and managed by people from the global North and people in need of help in the global South. In the decolonial debate, the principle of neutrality is challenged as it is used to uphold the supposedly neutral stance of international organisations as opposed to local, supposedly biased local organisations (Peace Direct, 2021). However, the inequalities in the humanitarian system that lead to assumptions about who is perceived as neutral and who is not must not lead us to question the principle of neutrality per se, but to question the power relations in the humanitarian system (see discussion of localisation below).

In attempting to decolonise the aid sector, four dimensions of reform can be identified in the context of North–South cooperation: 1) partnership and solidarity in project work, 2) structural changes in organisations, 3) awareness of racism, discrimination and privileges, and 4) self-reflexion on one's own global power position (Dombrowski, 2022). Equal partnerships require a "transition mindset, putting in place clear milestones for the transfer of power and resources to local organisations" (Peace Direct, 2021, p. 40). Structural change means different recruitment but also a change in knowledge production. Awareness of structural racism can be fostered through conversations with donors and communities about power and by being mindful of language (Peace Direct, 2021, p. 42). The fourth dimension implies that institutions in the global North take responsibility for causes of global inequality and raise awareness of the "mechanisms of world trade, the origins of raw materials and commodities as well as social phenomena such as racism, eurocentrism and privilege" (Dombrowski, 2022).

Attention to Power Imbalances is Needed

We now analyse how several challenges (some identified by the institutional reviews themselves) are related to the power imbalances foregrounded by the decolonial perspective, which in turn explain the wide discrepancy between the HDP concept and its implementation on the ground. These are silo thinking, state centrism, the 'coordination approach' and an apolitical view of 'collective outcomes'.

First, one of the practical hurdles in overcoming siloed structures is that the **silo thinking comes from international donors and aid agencies**. On the ground, in the day-to-day reality of people struggling to make a living and local organisations seeking to help them, it does not make sense to try to separate H, D and P activities (cf. Holliger et al., 2022). In a given real-life situation, everything is connected. In theory, the HDP is designed to respond to this very fact. In practice, however, many local NGOs that receive funding from international organisations have had to compartmentalise their activities to fit the donor's concepts. In crisis contexts, many already carry out humanitarian, development and peace activities simultaneously to provide the best assistance: "(W)hile local organisations may not be familiar with the jargon, they operationalise the nexus already" (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. 19). The very same donors now want to change this but struggle to act accordingly, as evidenced by reports that donors sometimes act against flexibility and prioritise their own interests over local needs (Kittaneh & Stolk, 2018).

Second, the dominant development models remain **state-centric**, hardly taking into account that (I)NGO cooperation with state authorities can be deeply problematic, especially in regions where populations have experienced violent conflict, war and autocratic or corrupt governments. Officially commissioned reviews show great concern about how to get national governments to implement humanitarian crisis response. Progress in advancing the nexus approach is seen in "some higher capacity situations in which government wants to meet humanitarian objectives through its own state systems, with international support" (CIC, 2019,

p. ix). In this regard, the IASC writes: "(T)he mapping shows the progress made in joining up analysis and planning documents in many countries, but it also shows the difficulty in translating global- and national-level commitment into programming and financing towards commonly agreed priorities at the subnational level" (IASC, 2021, p. 4). While the OECD review document acknowledges that many collective outcomes are not geared towards building national capacity in the medium term, donors and planners within the United Nations, the European Union and OECD nevertheless seem to expect governments in fragile contexts to implement the collective outcomes and do not question why it is difficult to implement collective outcomes with subnational state institutions. From a decolonial perspective, it is the state-centric, top-down approach initiated by external agencies that is already constituting an obstacle to implementation. Furthermore, the state-centric nature of much of the guidance, policy and review documents prevents open discussion and reflection on the limitations of working with and through state institutions. Macrae (2019) hence calls for more attention to the systematic analysis of the quality and quantity of development space in highly insecure, poorly governed spaces. There is little reflection on the role of governments in creating the conditions for conflict and various vulnerabilities, so Macrae (2019) asks: "(W)hat if governments are part of the problem?"

Third, state centrism is inherently linked to the coordination approach of UN institutions: Significantly, reviews and policy papers mention good practice examples of HDP nexus coordination from authoritarian contexts (Cameroon, Chad, Myanmar) (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. 13) without elaborating on **how** (I)NGOs can manoeuvre to provide assistance without strengthening state institutions that may expose the wider population to harm. The focus of the HDP nexus approach so far has been on coordination between aid agencies and within multi-mandate organisations such as the European Union, rather than on how to coordinate with diverse actors in the countries where they provide assistance. Moreover, what is mostly missing from the guidance documents and NGO reports is any consideration of how humanitarian, development and peace activities can reinforce or undermine each other. Conceptual ideas on how coordination can help to create productive synergies between the different types of activities—beyond avoiding duplication—are scarcely developed in guidance documents and NGO reports. Beyond the practical difficulties of improving coordination, DuBois (2020) is fundamentally critical of the '**coordination approach**' to the nexus:

The top-down Nexus framework produces a focus on structural solutions, so for example recommendations to upgrade multi-year operational planning (...)—ultimately, this interpretation of the Nexus functionally relies upon the existing paternalistic and procedure-ridden system, and it produces interagency-centric approaches in the name of people-centric objectives. To imagine alternatives requires the cultivation of Nexus-thinking. Without attempting a formal definition, Nexus-thinking refers to a future culture and ideology where the mindset within the three sectors is sufficiently cross-pollinated that the differences become technical, not normative and not hierarchical (pp. 10–11).

A decolonial perspective on the coordination approach would foreground the accountability of aid actors to local populations and raise the fundamental political question of to whom (I)NGOs should be accountable, particularly in authoritarian contexts and conflict settings. Accountability is a problem in conflict settings: "If governments are no longer the primary driver of decisions regarding resource allocation, who is, and who is scrutinising these processes in the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable?" (Macrae, 2019).

Fourth, the commissioned reviews found that "field actors in various contexts tend to set unrealistic collective outcomes, establish unfeasible indicators of success or turn a blind eye to unavoidable obstacles" (OECD, 2022a). There is a tendency to formulate guidance on the nexus approach that is too abstract and insufficiently connected to the everyday realities of working in fragile contexts (Quack & Südhoff, 2020). For instance, a policy paper recommending steps for the EU nexus approach states: "Getting started: Before operationalising the triple nexus (joint analysis and planning phase), the different actors involved need to have a common understanding of the objectives and priorities in a given country (...)" (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. v).

“Way forward: Achieving a common understanding of what ‘peace’ means with all actors involved is paramount” (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. 18).

Expecting to develop a *common* understanding of goals for a given country and of the meaning of ‘peace’ is problematic for three reasons. First, it is unrealistic to expect that actors with very different interests and cultures simply come together to develop a common understanding of the world. This does not diminish the importance of trying to forge a mutual understanding of the logics and workings of humanitarian, development and peace work if the HDP nexus is to produce positive results. Second, however, this expectation reflects the top-down approach to coordination, which starts with coordination between like-minded actors such as the United Nations and donor institutions—that is, external actors who de facto set the agenda of what collective outcomes are. Although the localisation agenda formally expects UN institutions and donors to coordinate with all kinds of ‘local’ actors, from national to local, from state to non-state actors, the fact that 98 per cent of international humanitarian aid is channelled through international agencies demonstrates that local actors are severely disadvantaged when it comes to weighing in on such decisions. Third, it is unrealistic to expect collective outcomes for such highly political and contested notions as ‘peace’ in regions experiencing war and violent conflict. Here, different armed actors (often including the state) often fight over competing visions of what political, economic, social and legal systems ‘peace’ should entail, for example: Should there be a multi-party system, and if so, what is the underlying electoral system and how are political offices distributed? What legal system should be implemented (e.g. secular law, Islamic law, customary laws)? What form should the economy take (capitalist, communitarian, export-oriented or aiming for self-sufficiency)? And what social system should be implemented (strong provision of public social services, or not)? Sometimes, they do so without taking into account the needs and visions of the wider population. Such competing needs, visions and interests can undermine ‘peace’, but they also need to be considered. In the reality of international crisis action, collective peace outcomes are either imposed from outside in the case of robust military mandates of international missions (e.g. Mali), or they tend to be far removed from the political conflict issues (for instance the focus of many HDP actions on displaced people). ‘Collective outcomes’ thus appear to be decoupled from the internal politics of a given context. Here, it is useful to recall the OECD DAC recommendation on political power:

Recognising that decisions should be grounded in an understanding of how power is distributed and used, (...), noting that all interventions affect political dynamics and that the political situation will determine both whether interventions can succeed and how these should be tailored for greatest impact (OECD, 2019).

From a decolonial perspective, therefore, it may be more important for international actors to come to an understanding of the multiple and contested understandings of ‘peace’ in a given situation (see section on peace below), rather than to seek a common understanding of what ‘peace’ means with all actors involved. Importantly, any such “political situation” that determines “whether interventions can succeed and how these should be tailored for greatest impact” (OECD, 2019) is also permeated by global power imbalances, some of which stem from the colonial past, including structural racism inherited from that period. For instance, the case of Mali shows that humanitarian access can be jeopardised when a former colonial power such as France leads international stabilisation missions (see information below and *Spotlight Mali* (Haidara, 2024)).

The abstract concepts of the HDP nexus, such as collective outcomes, risk obscuring this politics of intervention and the distribution of power. Yet, these power imbalances largely determine how the HDP nexus can be implemented. In what follows, we will look in more detail at what this means for two main approaches related to the HDP nexus: localisation and integration of peace.

The Concept of Localisation Needs to be Broadened

Guidance on implementing the localisation agenda typically reads as follows: Activities should be designed "(...) with local partners in the driving seat and as an integral part of the response" (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. 19).

Governments and local authorities should be engaged meaningfully, in order to strengthen national and local ownership and governments' leadership and governance capabilities. Communities and community-based organisations, including civil society, should also be enabled to respond effectively. This includes investing in their capacities and funding these organisations, in line with the localisation agenda (Veron & Hauck, 2021, p. 19).

And one could rephrase the last phrase to 'in line with the aid effectiveness agenda'. The failure of the aid effectiveness agenda (Brown, 2020) reminds us that there is something inherently flawed in aid relations: Power relations are skewed towards aid actors and negatively skewed towards aid recipients.

To illustrate our ideas on localisation, we begin with some insights from our country case studies (Haidara, 2024; Kemmerling, 2024; Meininghaus, 2024). All three cases, Mali, South Sudan and Iraq, show that the coordination between UN and government actors is a top-down process. Certain HDP reference points, such as the Common Context Analysis or the UNSCDF, have been introduced between different UN agencies in Iraq, South Sudan and Mali. This has been done in parallel with government-led national development plans—although the government itself is often a problematic partner. In this respect, the HDP continues to reflect its top-down origins from the United Nations vis-à-vis national governments and from both vis-à-vis society.

Accordingly, in Iraq and South Sudan, the implementation of the HDP nexus is still very much top-down in practice. Only four per cent of humanitarian funding in Iraq went towards national and local NGOs. This observation reflects a long history of aid engagement in Iraq, where local staff with considerable expertise have rarely been recruited and valuable local knowledge continues to be overlooked (ICVA, 2022, p. 5). In South Sudan, pooled funding such as the Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience Trust Fund or the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund has been seen as an innovative funding tool to enable integrated programming along the HDP nexus in some of the country's conflict hotspots (Chan & Schmidlin, 2023; Horstmann, 2022; Tschunkert et al., 2023). Implementing organisations include UNMISS, various UN agencies, INGOs and national/local NGOs (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2023). However, the majority of funding continues to go to UN agencies and INGOs; in the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund, national and local civil society organisations received only ten per cent of funding between 2016 and 2020 (Tschunkert et al., 2023, p. 8).

In South Sudan, donors remain reluctant to fund national and local NGOs because they perceive them as less reliable and capable than INGOs. Moreover, shifting funding to national and local NGOs, does not automatically lead to a bottom-up approach. A recent study in South Sudan (Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility & Detro Research and Advisory, 2023) has shown that communities often feel insufficiently engaged by the community-based approaches of international and local NGOs, and that they criticise them for having little room to negotiate how they would like to be involved and for bringing their interests and demands beyond the siloed sectors that dominate programme design and donor requirements (→ *Spotlight Iraq* (Meininghaus, 2024) and *Spotlight South Sudan* (Kemmerling, 2024)).

These findings from our own research resonate with findings from other studies on the barriers to implementing the localisation agenda and with criticisms from decolonise aid movements about the narrow scope of the localisation agenda. As Barbelet et al. (2021) note, international actors' perceptions of local actors' capabilities and perceived risks fundamentally hinder their own stated objective of localisation:

The literature focuses on the risks to international actors when partnering with local actors, rather than vice versa, raising issues of power imbalances. Similarly, capacity-strengthening approaches further entrench such power dynamics: (...) capacity-strengthening requirements are still largely defined by international organisations and predominantly focus on (...) their capacity to fulfil donor requirements' (p. 6)

Table 2: A Comparison of HDP Implementation in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan

	Iraq	Mali	South Sudan
Origins of the HDP nexus	EU pilot in 2017	Recommendations of 2017 UN STAIT Mission	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018
Current phase	Humanitarian aid phasing out	Dependency on humanitarian and development aid	Humanitarian aid exceeds development aid
Key UN documents on the HDP nexus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ 2020 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) \ 2021+ 2022 Common Country Analysis (CCA) \ Annual Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) until 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ 2015-2019 UN Integrated Development Assistance Framework \ 2020-2024 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) \ 2020 UNDP Nexus HDP Strategy \ United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) \ 2020-2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ 2019-2021/22 UN Cooperation Framework \ 2023-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) \ 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)
Key national government documents on the HDP nexus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ 2021 Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ Strategic Framework for Economic Growth and Sustainable Development (CREDD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \ 2021-24 Revised National Development Strategy (R-NDS)
Implementation of HDP nexus by the United Nations	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.	Top down—MINUSMA's implementation of Quick Impact Projects has blurred the line between humanitarian action and peacekeeping mission	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 HDP nexus by organisations other than the United Nations	Limited, esp. peacebuilding activities often raise objections by armed and political actors	Contribution of local NGOs limited to providing support to INGOs—but a bottom-up approach to conflict management in several localities.	Some bottom-up—Community-based approaches have been implemented by INGOs in partnership with national and local NGOs, funded by bilateral donors.

Arguments that caution against localisation as a solution question the quality and transparency of local actors (problem of corruption, local power games) (Roepstorff, 2019). Local partners are seen as 'politicised or selective', leading aid organisations to argue for an 'impact-driven' approach, where impact on those most in need is the bottom line (Kittaneh & Stolk, 2018, p. 18). However, a recent literature review on localisation shows that these (negative) perceptions of international actors about problems associated with local actors are hardly based on evidence (Barbelet et al., 2021). Aid actors in the global South are frustrated to see that the localisation agenda does not seem to take into account the underlying racisms that may drive the choice of international institutions: "Perhaps most tellingly of all is that in the discussions I've seen or read about localisation, very few of them attempt to address the structural racism that is hard baked into the system" (Mathews, 2022). In addition, international organisations can also be 'politicised or selective', as "any humanitarian presence in

conflict zones is inherently political" (Barakat & Milton, 2020, p. 150). International actors, therefore, need to reflect on their own political positioning and biases, as decolonial critique demands. Some practical tools for this now exist (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada Foundation (BGC), 2022; Greijn & Heemskerk, 2020).

Beyond arguments about the questionable effectiveness of a localised approach, a critical perspective on the local turn in peacebuilding challenges us to ask what the 'local' actually is. It is not clear where the 'local' begins, whether national governments, decentralised government institutions or rather non-state actors are meant by it. Arguably, international humanitarian organisations also become part of local situations as soon as they intervene (Roepstorff, 2019). If international humanitarian organisations become part of local frameworks and dynamics, it becomes difficult to argue that (other) local actors are 'political' while international actors are not. Furthermore, the peace and development challenges communities face are often transnational, demonstrating the limitations of a localised approach (Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson 2023, p. 24).

It is also important to recognise that 'the local' has been oversimplified or romanticised (Bräuchler, 2017; Bräuchler & Naucke, 2017; Mac Ginty, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015): In fact, 'the local' (everywhere) is a highly heterogeneous space with multiple actors, including individuals, households, civil society organisations, (I)NGOs, political actors, other local authorities, businesses and—in protracted crisis contexts—often state and non-state armed actors. These may compete over resources or have conflicting interests, but they may also cooperate and negotiate. Importantly, 'the local' is socially divided by class, a heterogeneity that is overlooked by the notion of the 'local', as Maha Shuayb, a scholar from Lebanon, stresses:

Personally, I believe I have other, more interesting identities and experiences to bring to the conversation than my geographical background. Yet, to the international aid organisations, or those considered 'non-local' in the sector, my identity politics is what's most interesting. My representation of other locals is never questioned, while to many Lebanese, being educated in elite universities in the United Kingdom, and having never spent time in informal tented settlements or camps, I'm hardly a local. Localisation often implies this reductionist understanding of who is local, excluding those most disadvantaged – who arguably need their voices heard most – and empowering others like me (Shuayb, 2022).

Beyond the structural racist prejudices against local organisations, thinkers of the decolonisation movement criticise the narrow notion of localisation used by UN institutions to conceptualise the HDP nexus. In their eyes, the United Nation's notion of localisation (see background above) "(...) suggests that localisation is nothing more than a technocratic exercise in identifying local implementing partners for specific humanitarian activities, rather than a more holistic approach to supporting genuinely locally owned civil society efforts" (Mathews, 2022).

In partnerships between international and 'local' organisations under the localisation agenda, international organisations set the agenda, establish and manage the relationships with funding partners and government offices and define the partnership framework. This is countered by decolonial thinkers who call for more equitable "local led" or "community-led" partnerships (Doan & Fifield, 2020; Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson, 2023, pp. 23–24). According to Shuayb, (2022), "(i)f localisation is to be anything more than just a buzzword and tokenism, it must include people from the Global South, from the conception of an idea right through to execution – whether that's research, programme response, or policy development".

There are several ongoing attempts to clearly define what equitable partnerships, "local led" and "community-led" efforts mean (Doan & Fifield, 2020; Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson, 2023, pp. 23–24). Peace Direct (2021, p. 40) has developed nine principles for effective partnerships that INGO can use as a starting point. These are

Acknowledge and challenge power imbalances; (2) Confront racism and prejudice; (3) Support local leadership; (4) Strive for mutual accountability; (5) Establish long term partnerships; (6) Provide unrestricted funding; (7) Be adaptable, and promote adaptability and resilience with your partners; (8) Consider non-financial resources; and (9) Ensure that partnership transitions are a collaborative endeavour.

In practical terms, "local led" can mean that local civil society organisations "have the right to propose interventions and priorities" that reflect interests and priorities of related constituencies; that they "engage directly in regional and global capacity strengthening initiatives as actors in their own right, not as 'partners'" (Kuloba-Warria & Tomlinson 2023, pp.23-24). We now focus on how this plays out in the peacebuilding efforts of actors seeking to implement the HDP nexus approach.

Peacebuilding is a Political Endeavour

As with localisation, we argue that in attempting to integrate the peace pillar into humanitarian or development interventions, aid agencies need to develop an awareness of their own political positioning in the past and present. The distinction between "little" and "big" P interventions (see background above) is useful in defining certain red lines for engagement. However, engaging in peace activities is a political endeavour in any case, and limiting activities to "little p" should not be used as a means of staying away from politics. We begin the section again with insights from the country case studies, which will show that "little p" activities can be perceived just as politically sensitive as "big P" activities, depending on the context.

The implementation of the HDP nexus and the reactions to HDP programming in Iraq, Mali and South Sudan were very different:

- \ HDP programming was designed by the UN (and other) military missions in Mali and South Sudan from a stabilisation/ peacebuilding perspective, while HDP programming in Iraq was introduced from a humanitarian perspective.
- \ In Mali, the close link between HDP programming and military missions was controversial. In South Sudan, local civil society institutions saw UNMISS as more neutral than national institutions despite its mixed peace and security roles. In Iraq, the United Nations has no military mission as such.

In Mali, military intervention—often perceived as a neo-colonial dynamic—has undermined peacebuilding efforts and jeopardised even purely humanitarian work. In the Malian context, the first to put the HDP nexus into practice were the UN institutions, led by UNDP and UNOCHA, and the military missions, namely the UN MINUSMA Stabilization Mission with its quick-impact projects and the French mission Barkhane with its 3D approach (diplomacy, development, defence). In 2017, a mission by the Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team recommended greater engagement in this area (Veron & Hauck, 2021). The debates around its implementation in Mali took place against a backdrop of strong anti-colonial opposition to the international military presence, whether French or MINUSMA. Significantly, the idea of implementing the HDP nexus in Mali has generated considerable resistance and controversy. This immediately led to a highly polarised debate around the nexus, as several stakeholders had reservations and were confused about the concept of 'peace' (→ *Spotlight Mali* (Haidara, 2024)).

In Iraq, in contrast, we do not find a strong engagement of military actors in the HDP nexus approach, but nevertheless, the national government and local political and armed actors are particularly critical of peace activities. The case of Iraq shows that "little p" does not mean that aid activities are apolitical. The results of our interview analysis in Iraq show that the implementation of peace activities in Iraq remains very difficult for mainly two reasons: In Sinjar, research participants felt that the time is not yet ripe to implement, for example, social cohesion activities—nor are they considered appropriate. Since the genocide of the Yazidi population by Islamic State forces in 2014, mistrust, a lack of access to the justice system and persecution of perpetrators as well as the lack of other forms of transitional justice mean that fear persists. This highlights the need for governance and justice reforms, which have not been introduced in the last nine years. In addition, interviewees emphasised that, in their view, the solution to the situation does not lie with the local population but with armed actors and other authorities at the local and national level who are blocking a political and rights-based solution. Peace activities at the local level among the population are, therefore, not seen 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. In some cases, however, peace activities, such as the establishment of peace committees, have been carried out in a participatory manner despite such opposition (→ *Spotlight Iraq* (Meininghaus, 2024)).

The case examples from Mali and Iraq show that in all three contexts, the distinction between “big P” and “little p” activities is useful as a starting point for humanitarian actors to draw red lines for engagement in peace activities. However, limiting one’s work to “little p” activities may not be sufficient if other actors in the country are engaged in “big P” activities that undermine the work of one’s own organisation, as was the case in Mali. The debate about what kind of activities should be considered ‘peace’ is still alive and ongoing: NGO actors still fear that if their work goes hand in hand with peacebuilding, especially through military missions, they will be perceived as taking sides in the conflict and lose their neutrality. As the NGO coalition VOICE in 2019 put it: “If there is an insistence on supporting peace processes or stabilisation in a conflict setting, there is the very real risk that principled humanitarian action cannot be effective” (Redvers & Parker, 2020). The risks of such an integrated approach, of humanitarian aid being instrumentalised for the purpose of war rather than peace, are also highlighted in academic contributions (Schetter & Prinz, 2024).

Despite the resistance to the peace component of the HDP approach and international military missions in Mali, the “little” p activities do work under certain conditions. Here, the work of local NGOs with their local knowledge and networks is crucial and, apparently, valued by international NGOs as well. Despite the extremely challenging security context, local people are the main actors in resolving their own conflicts.

While the political nature of “big P” interventions is clear, the IASC’s description of “little p” activities as contributing to equitable service delivery and social cohesion suggests that they are apolitical. The question of how UN agencies and (I)NGOs are part of local and national political issues, resources and power relations is excluded from the debate. However, contributing to “functioning, inclusive and participatory administration” (IASC, 2020, p. 9) can be very challenging and controversial in many conflict contexts, where corrupt, biased or simply ineffective state services are at the root of armed conflict. The political nature of such activities is clear when the IASC recommends “efforts to change policies, laws and institutional practices that have institutionalised inequality and fuelled perceptions of marginalisation” (IASC, 2020, p. 10). Moreover, measures to increase state accountability, such as governance and justice sector reforms, which the IASC refers to as “little p”, are often at the national or regional level rather than at the community level and are just as politically contentious as “big P” activities.

The aim of developing a common way forward for UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs, built around a ‘shared vision of society’ as an end goal, is also a deeply political endeavour. From a decolonial perspective, it raises the question of who defines what constitutes this ‘shared vision’ and how this vision is achieved in practice. In societies and communities experiencing protracted crises, war and violent conflict, poverty and often high levels of inequality in access to natural resources, health, education and political participation, such a shared vision of society is highly contested. In such settings, deciding over a shared vision of peace is an inherently political question, while UN agencies and (I)NGOs do not represent politically legitimised actors whose activities would be permitted (or denied) by representative governments elected in free, secret, fair and democratic elections.

From a decolonial perspective, even for “little p” activities—such as local conflict resolution—the question arises: Who decides which conflicts are addressed by UN and INGO activities and how? From a decolonial perspective, it would be necessary for local communities to be involved and have a say in project design, and where a joint vision of what conflict resolution should achieve is contested, different perspectives would need to be included in project planning. This can be achieved, for example, by creating safe spaces in which people of different ages, genders, religious or ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses or political affiliations work together to identify local conflicts and develop priorities and formats for resolving them. A decolonial approach here does not mean that foreign aid agencies should not implement initiatives, but rather that they

should prioritise the needs and visions for peace expressed by those they serve. The crucial difference is the extent to which local populations are not only consulted (if at all), but that their needs and visions for peace set the agenda and, importantly, are part of the decision-making processes.⁶ To some extent, some humanitarian organisations already involve communities in project design.

Is it, therefore, realistic to expect joint goals—in the form of collective outcomes—in a country characterised by highly contentious politics, economic interests and competition among armed groups? Can there be shared development and peace objectives when these objectives are inherently political? And to what extent are the goals and priorities of UN agencies—and more broadly of INGOs and local NGOs—complementary or conflicting?

The differences between Mali and South Sudan in the reactions of international military missions to HDP activities are instructive in terms of colonial entanglements. The perception that the international mission was closely linked to the former colonial power undermined the international community's peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts in Mali. Humanitarian actors feared being confused with military personnel. In South Sudan, the UN military mission appears to have been less clearly associated with previous external domination and more with its protection mandate in the last civil war (Quack & Südhoff, 2020).

Colonial continuities should therefore be taken into account in any attempt at conflict sensitivity / Do No Harm and peacebuilding. Violent conflicts are often linked to colonial legacies. Avoiding the reproduction of past power imbalances requires an analysis of how these conflict histories have shaped current power imbalances. To achieve this, knowledge production must be decolonised, too (Peace Direct, 2021, 2022b). In particular, key to a decolonial knowledge production are context and conflict analyses that are co-produced with local organisations and a wide range of local households. To this end, experienced INGOs and local NGOs can jointly develop criteria for the mutual selection of cooperation partners and informants from the communities. As the literature and our own interviews show, contextual and conflict analyses are not yet carried out systematically or, where they are, they often lack the necessary depth or omit crucial information about armed groups and their motives for fighting.

In terms of the political positioning of aid organisations, **more dialogue is needed on what humanitarian principles are** and why they matter (Macrae, 2019). Some argue that the humanitarian principles are all meant to serve the larger goal of humanity, just as development and peace work do, and therefore, neutrality is not an end in itself (DuBois, 2020). Combined with the decolonial critique of the illusion of neutrality of international organisations, a possible solution for humanitarian organisations could be a reflexive and critical positioning towards the militarised solutions that some actors present as integral to the 'peace' component of the HDP approach (cf. Schetter & Prinz, 2024).

6 \ This still leaves room for international aid agencies to decide to only support activities that are in line with human rights and not to get involved if, for instance, they cannot ensure that women are included.

Conclusions: A Decolonial Perspective on the Way Forward

As a result of widespread popular dissatisfaction with Western dominance in the humanitarian system, UN agencies and NGOs have emphasised the need to implement the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus from the bottom up. At the same time, recent critiques from a decolonial perspective have highlighted the structural power imbalances in the aid system. In this Discussion Paper, we have analysed how the HDP nexus should work from the bottom up and what a decolonial perspective can contribute to this. The focus on the HDP nexus is important, we argued, because the unequal power relations within the aid sector and between aid organisations and local communities, as pointed out in decolonial critique, become a particular challenge for humanitarian assistance and development cooperation when operating in situations of armed conflict and aiming to include peacebuilding activities.

Our key findings show that the current state of the HDP nexus as a concept and its implementation in practice faces manifold obstacles to a bottom-up approach. Studies and reviews by UN institutions and NGOs mainly point to structural challenges such as unrealistic expectations of collective outcomes and siloed funding, which hinder coordination between different actors, localisation and integration of peace activities. However, we found that the discrepancy between the high standards set in the HDP nexus debate and the realities of implementing the nexus is more fundamentally linked to unequal power relations in the system.

First, we found that the HDP nexus approach is **largely implemented in a top-down manner**, with actors from the global North remaining the decision-making body for agenda setting and coordination. From a decolonial perspective, the United Nations's 'coordination approach' is tied to a state-centric agenda that has difficulty extending to non-state and non-Western organisations. However, it is these actors who are often most familiar with local contexts, conflict actors and conflict dynamics, which in the case of armed conflict are highly complex and need to be understood in depth to ensure that no harm is done. Similarly, coordination is sometimes unwelcome, especially by humanitarian actors who fear that if they are seen to be coordinating, for example, with peacekeeping missions, their aid delivery may be perceived as part of military missions, which would/does hinder their access. Even where there is increased coordination to achieve collective outcomes, it is still mostly done top-down and limited to UN- and national state institutions. As we have shown, localisation in terms of channelling funds through local state or non-state organisations is still extremely limited, at least for UN organisations.

Second, and related to that, we show that a **localisation approach is not only limited, but risks reproducing current power imbalances rather than overcoming them**. For example, localisation as promoted by international aid agencies since the WHS 2016 still leaves local organisations and communities with little decision-making power and influence over project design. From a decolonial perspective, localisation does not end with the transfer of funds from international to national or local civil society organisations. There is no guarantee that this will change the power imbalances of the aid system, where Western donors and debates in high-level international fora decide upon the flow of money, determining which types, modi and localities (H, D, and/or P) are prioritised. Such an approach contrasts with the fact that often, local communities, staff and NGOs are the most familiar with the root causes and dynamics of conflict, needs and risks/strengths of support, yet they are the least and last consulted.

Third, we find that **peacebuilding activities, especially 'little' peace activities, often claim to be apolitical**. However, the empirical findings from the country cases show that peace can be controversial, such as the stabilisation policies of international military missions in Mali, or too politically sensitive to be implemented at all, as seen in Iraq. From a decolonial perspective, for UN organisations, INGOs and national governments—who are often parties to ongoing wars and conflicts—to decide on 'collective outcomes' is a highly political act, especially in societies deeply divided by war and violent conflict with unrepresentative governments. In this respect, peace activities are particularly sensitive when they risk replacing real political negotiating processes, for example about which areas of the country will receive aid, which forms of aid will be prioritised, and which vision of peace for the society and its political and social order will be strengthened.

Abstract concepts of the HDP nexus such as 'localisation', 'collective outcomes' and 'peace' contain contested legacies of colonial power imbalances between the global North and the global South inherent in the international humanitarian system.

At the same time, the HDP nexus approach makes these power imbalances more visible, as different actors, from the international to the local, are called upon to work together on a more equal footing. The HDP thus offers an opportunity to expose the political positioning of international aid actors and to include a reflection of their own positioning in the respective contexts in their Do-No-Harm approaches. We, therefore, propose the following five key principles as a way forward for a bottom-up approach from a decolonial perspective:

- \ **From a 'White gaze' to decolonial awareness:** Awareness is the beginning of a decolonial perspective. The decolonial approach asks international aid organisations to question the extent to which a 'veil of ignorance' of local crisis contexts is accompanied by a certain 'White gaze' that sees, for example, populations in Africa or the Middle East as "prone to conflict" (cf. Dombrowski, 2022; cf. Greijn & Heemskerk, 2020; Peace Direct, 2021). The question of the extent to which today's conflicts can be traced back to Western—including but not only colonial—interventions in these regions is also part of such reflections.
- \ **From knowledge production to the co-production of knowledge:** In H, D and P settings, knowledge production refers to how UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs source and generate knowledge about their working environment and their internal planning, implementation and monitoring, including different forms of analysis (e.g. context, conflict, security, gender...). **A decolonial approach to knowledge production** requires that local knowledge be given equal value to the knowledge generated by headquarters and international staff. In particular, context and conflict analyses co-produced with local organisations and a wide range of local households are key to decolonial knowledge production. At the same time, such co-production of conflict analysis should not be limited to local conflict analysis but should also apply to the nationwide country frameworks such as the UNDCF and thus to country-wide conflict analysis.
- \ **From localisation to local ownership:** Beyond a bottom-up approach to localisation, a decolonial approach is called for that prioritises the needs and visions of local populations—a "more holistic approach to supporting genuinely locally owned civil society efforts" (Mathews, 2022), more equitable "local led" or "community-led" partnerships (Angelini & Brown, 2023; Doan & Fifield, 2020). Such an approach needs to better engage communities throughout the project management cycle and prioritise local agendas. A decolonial approach to localisation would seek to overcome the othering of 'the' local as remote, 'backward', 'undeveloped', by acknowledging the multifold global connections of local arenas and situations, including through the trajectories of protracted crises; this, at times, implies acknowledging decades of humanitarian interventions, which have become part of the 'local'.
- \ **From "little" peace to 'community-led' peace activities:** As for the third pillar of 'peace', red lines should be identified in relation to humanitarian principles to decide when or where a nexus approach is not or no longer appropriate (cf. VOICE, 2019, p. 58). Nevertheless, the cases of Iraq, Mali and South Sudan show that 'little p' activities, such as supporting local peace committees in the areas of operation are possible and work when such committees are not imposed from the outside but are built from the bottom up with the knowledge, peoples and structures that exist locally. At the same time, great care must be taken to avoid unintentionally exacerbating local conflict dynamics by conducting co-produced thorough and regular conflict analyses that measure the impact of aid projects—including peace activities—on local conflict dynamics. Even humanitarian interventions, such as the provision of water in situations where water scarcity is a regular source of conflict can help to prevent such conflict if this is the intention of the intervention's design. This is why, on the other hand, humanitarian actors should not shy away from peace activities out of a general fear of compromising humanitarian principles. In

fact, any action by an external actor can change the power dynamics in a given setting. It is, therefore, better to be 'politically smart' than to be 'politically blind' or, as Kittaneh and Stolk (2018, p. 19) put it: "There is a need for the whole program design to include the political realities; thinking politically is not only for governance or conflict experts - all technical staff are also required to obtain this mindset".

- \ **From politically blind to politically smart:** This does not mean that HDP-implementing UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs should become political actors, but that they should acknowledge that their presence in highly contested crisis contexts can have inherently political implications. In line with decolonial critique, an ongoing dialogue on colonial continuities and how to overcome them can help to make the HDP approach more sustainable. A decolonial perspective challenges the possibility of neutrality for international actors. While humanitarian actors must avoid taking sides in an ongoing conflict to maintain access to people in need, this does not mean that they are politically neutral: Humanitarian organisations should reflect on how global power imbalances and colonial histories position them vis-a-vis target groups and cooperation partners. Only when such power imbalances are reflected in day-to-day aid operations can they be addressed and the influence of local actors on project design be increased.

Finally, a decolonial perspective that seeks deep insights into local contexts and takes local populations' experiences, sentiments and objections very seriously and prioritises them can help avoid some of the mistakes of the past. There are, therefore, reasons to believe that the decolonial critique can make a highly valuable contribution to transforming the overall debate on the HDP nexus. Translated into the above practices by international aid agencies in partnership with local organisations and populations, decolonial critique can make a real difference on the ground.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BICC	<i>Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies</i>
BLM	<i>Black Lives Matter</i>
BMZ	<i>German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development</i>
CCA	<i>Common Country Analysis</i>
DCO	<i>Development Coordinator Office (UN)</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
GFFO	<i>German Federal Foreign Office</i>
HDP	<i>humanitarian-development-peace nexus</i>
HRP	<i>Humanitarian Response Plan</i>
IASC	<i>Inter-Agency Standing Committee (UN)</i>
INGO	<i>International non-governmental organisation</i>
IRC	<i>International Rescue Committee</i>
LRRD	<i>linking relief, rehabilitation and development</i>
MI	<i>Malteser International</i>
MINUSMA	<i>United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission</i>
MSF	<i>Doctors Without Borders</i>
NGO	<i>Non-governmental organisation</i>
NWW	<i>New Way of Working</i>
ODA	<i>Official Development Aid</i>
OECD	<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</i>
OECD-DAC	<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Development Assistance Committee</i>
RCO	<i>Resident Coordinator Office (UN)</i>
SDG	<i>Sustainable Development Goal</i>
WHH	<i>Welthungerhilfe</i>
WHS	<i>World Humanitarian Summit</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
UNDP	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>
UNOCHA	<i>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</i>
UNPBF	<i>United Nations Peacebuilding Fund</i>
UNSDCF	<i>United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework</i>

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PHOTO CREDITS

Title image: image by rawpixel.com

PUBLICATION DATE

16 January 2024



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