# THE TRIPLE NEXUS IN MALI

## Coordination, Securitisation and Blurred Lines

Andrea Steinke

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## Abstract

Protracted displacement crisis, armed conflict, staggering rates of food insecurity: the current situation in Mali is a case in point for the scenarios envisioned when people started conceptualising and pushing for the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, also known as the Triple Nexus, in 2016. However, in Mali, as in other places, the policy framework is met with scepticism and uncertainty. Research indicates that instead of integrating siloed sectors according to its original intention, the urge to implement Triple Nexus activities divided the sectors in Mali even further. The perception of the Triple Nexus ranged from a rather basic understanding of it as an instrument of co-ordination between actors from the three sectors, to those classifying it as blurring the lines between peace, stabilisation and counter-terrorism agendas between civilian and military actors and forcing humanitarian actors into a development-security nexus under suspicion of serving the interests of European border regimes. Accordingly, the debates surrounding the Triple Nexus were met by a multitude of challenges further exemplified below.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

The Triple Nexus, also known as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus, is a policy framework seeking to integrate and streamline more efficient coordination and collaboration between humanitarian, development and peace/security actors (OECD 2019).

While there have been earlier attempts to synchronize and integrate the workings of humanitarian and development assistance in conflict settings, like the Linking Relief, Rehabilitation, Development (LRRD) framework, the debate surrounding the Triple Nexus began to accelerate in the context of the World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul in 2016. As climate change and violent conflict were putting a strain on under-funded and overburdened aid structures and 80% of humanitarian funding was put towards protracted crisis, the sector was looking for adapted ways to confront the in-creasing challenges.

To realise the agenda to "Leave No One Behind", the UN Secretary-General announced a so-called "New Way of Working" where "humanitarian and development actors need to work collaboratively across silos and mandates to implement plans with a clear and measurable collective outcome that reduces the vulnerability of internally displaced persons over the long term" (United Nations 2016, 23). At the same time, another rele-vant process, the Grand Bargain, a reform agenda for the humanitarian system ratified by the largest donors and humanitarian NGOs, was launched.

While there is broad agreement on the strategic advantages of breaking down the sectorial siloes where they hinder successful interventions, in practise the concept of the Triple Nexus is subjected to a variety of contestations, such as the lack of a shared understanding of peace within the nexus and its commonalities to social cohesion and demarcations to security, counter-terrorism and stabilisation, questions of ownership over and leadership in the process and the primacy of varying contexts that cannot easily be handled with a universal one-size-fits-all approach. Last but not least, human-itarian organisations in particular fear threats to the integrity of the humanitarian prin-ciples, most notably independence and neutrality, that could potentially result from joining forces under the umbrella of collective outcomes and being pushed into state-led frameworks.

Others have argued for a re-evaluation of the humanitarian resistance towards the Triple Nexus and opted for inquiring about the potentials of the Triple Nexus for more operational impact, a more people-centric approach that therefore carries better regard for the humanitarian principles, framed under the term "Nexus-thinking" (DuBois 2020).

Figure A:
Infographic Mali.
Source: Centre for Humanitarian Action.

# MALI

20,5 Million

95% Islam
3%  Traditional faiths
2%  Christianity

Bamako

Source: Wikimedia

## 346.000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs)

Source: UNHCR (2021)

**5.9 Million**

people in need

**957.000**

people in high acute
food insecurity

**184 out of 189**

Human Development
Index

Source: OCHA (2021), FAO (2021), WFP (2020)

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Mali – in a downward spiral of political instability, jihadist violence, economic deprivation, and humanitarian crisis since 2012 – was identified as an important case to study the potential, challenges and workings of the concept of the Triple Nexus put in practise. While there is vast literature and research on humanitarian challenges, peacebuilding, security politics and governance in Mali – both in policy and academia – little research has been published on the interlinkages of humanitarian, development and peace actors in the country, with a few notable exceptions (Tronc et al. 2019). This paper based on research interviews[1] and desk research on the topic seeks to fill the gap.

## Background of the political crisis

Unsatisfied with the Malian government response to the Tuareg/Imushagh[2] insurgency in northern Mali, parts of the Malian army toppled the Malian president in 2012. Additionally, jihadist groups[3], partially looking for new opportunities after the NATO intervention pushed them out of Libya in 2011, seized the moment to claim territory in northern Mali. "Jihadist organisations […] managed to co-opt local demands for protection, redistribution and moral integrity by framing the revolt against corrupt neo-patrimonial regimes backed by the West as part of the struggle for the global jihad" (Raineri and Strazzari 2017). The fragility of the Malian state is understood both as a cause and effect of jihadist violence in the region (Lierl 2020). The French military-led Operation Serval was deployed in 2013 to oust the jihadists and reinstate the authority of the Malian state. The foreign military forces were able to halt the advance of jihadists to the capital Bamako and prevent the overthrow of the central government. Yet, since the peace accord of Algiers (2015), an agreement between the Malian government, a coalition of pro-government armed groups and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA) widely regarded as ineffective, the security situation has steadily deteriorated. The centre of conflict moved from the north of the country, the geographical origin of the conflict in 2012, to the centre, especially towards the tri-border region to Niger and Burkina Faso.

While state services and the rule of law are mostly absent from those regions, intercommunal violence, armed attacks and unrest are severely affecting the Malian population.

In the context of an extremely volatile security situation, state authority was in a constant process of decline. In 2020, weekly massive manifestations in the Malian capital Bamako demanded the Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, popularly known as IBK, to step down. Finally, in September of that year, a coup d'état by the military forced the president out of office and heralded an 18-month transition period of government, with a prima facie civilian government in charge.[4]

## Exacerbation of humanitarian needs,
## development hiatus

At the end of 2019, of the 50.8 million people internally displaced around the globe, 45.7 million - roughly 90% - were displaced as a result of conflict and violence.[5] Those numbers are the highest ever recorded and stand in line with a variety of other studies pointing out that the recurrent and protracted crises resulting from conflict and violence are often at the heart of humanitarian crises. According to UNHCR, protracted displacement crises last 26 years on average today (UNHCR 2017).

The multifaceted political and security crisis in Mali has also led to high levels of internal displacement. A record number of 290.000 people were internally displaced in mid-2020 (Global Humanitarian Overview 2021). More than half a million citizens were threatened by food insecurity – IPC levels three and four - in 2019 with nearly 200.000 children suffering from acute malnutrition (Global Humanitarian Overview 2020). This number again exponentially grew and reached 1.3 million of an overall 19 million Malians by the middle of 2020.

An overall 7.1 million people are projected to be in need in 2021 (Global Humanitarian Overview 2021). Currently 2.4 million people are relying on support to protect their livelihoods. Even comparing 2019 and 2020 indicates a very severe increase in humanitarian need that is progressively difficult to tackle for aid organisations due to restricted access and the continuing targeting of aid workers by jihadist groups.

The complexity of the crisis in Mali has also resulted in a constant degradation of advances in the development sector. While research has suggested that development strategies in and for Mali have long suffered from a lack of local ownership (Bergamaschi 2007), prior to 2012 Mali's reputation in the international arena was that of Europe's "donor darling" and the African model democracy (Tronc, Grace, and Nahikian 2019). Some double-mandated organisations are directing their humanitarian efforts to the regions of their development interventions to try to safeguard the success of earlier projects. What is more, access for NGOs, international as well as national, is challenging and often restricted in affected regions, such as in the centre and the north of Mali. Acts of intentional starvation, including siege-like tactics, attacks on school canteens, and direct attacks on aid workers and their facilities have been reported lately (Welthungerhilfe and terre des hommes 2019). Particularly in the northern part of Mali, it is mainly humanitarian NGOs that implement projects with development dividends as many single-mandated development organisations had to withdraw their presence from the region due to the volatile security context.

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Communities are turning to locally rooted non-state armed groups (NSAG) for security and protection, inherently questioning the legitimacy of foreign intervention as much as of state authority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put another strain on the already volatile situation in the West African country in 2020. While the number of registered infections is comparatively low (8.111 on 1 February 2021)[6], the secondary effects of the pandemic are a source of concern. As in most other regions, school closures, overstrained health facilities, suspended vaccination campaigns for other diseases, and suspension of income-generating activities as a result of COVID-19 containment measures will have long-lasting effects, especially for the poorest households. Funds earmarked for development projects have been re-assigned for COVID relief.[7]

The nearly tripled numbers in severely food insecure citizens, as well as the rising numbers of IDPs in the country, are the symptomatic indicators of a multifaceted crisis that is spiralling beyond control. The latest report of the UN SG on the situation in Mali concerns the continuing degradation of security, as well.[8] In the first half of 2020, 589 alone civilians have been killed in central Mali.[9] Neither the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) nor the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) are capable of effectively providing security to civilians. What is worse, the Malian Army itself is involved in acts of extra-legal killings (MacDougall 2021) and therefore not considered an impartial actor. As a consequence, communities are turning to locally rooted non-state armed groups (NSAG) for security and protection (Bodian, Tobie, and Marending 2020) inherently questioning the legitimacy of foreign intervention as much as of state authority. COVID-19 is greatly adding to the already challenging theatre of intervention in Mali.

## Mix of international and regional military actors

In the Malian context, an evaluation of the potentials of the Triple Nexus cannot be understood without looking at the conflict and the international actors involved, in particular, in efforts of its resolution. Mali's position as a "donor darling" changed simultaneously with the security situation to that of "Africa's Afghanistan" (Andersson 2019). The threat of a jihadist takeover, the increasing level of violence against civilians and the overall decline in security were met with increased levels of foreign military presence, initially welcomed by Malian central authorities as well as the majority of the Malian population.

The French military-led Operation Serval transformed to Operation Barkhane in 2014, The aim of the 5.000 soldier strong military counter-insurgency (COIN) operation is to target jihadism in the five Sahel states Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Mali. It is supported by the Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel or FC-G5S, the combined military forces of the five states, launched in 2017. Operation Tacouba, a French-led military special forces training mission was launched in 2020 as a supplement to Barkhane, initially meant to more strongly involve European actors like Germany.

Figure B:
Map Distribution of displaced people in Mali.
Source: UN OCHA, October 2020.

B
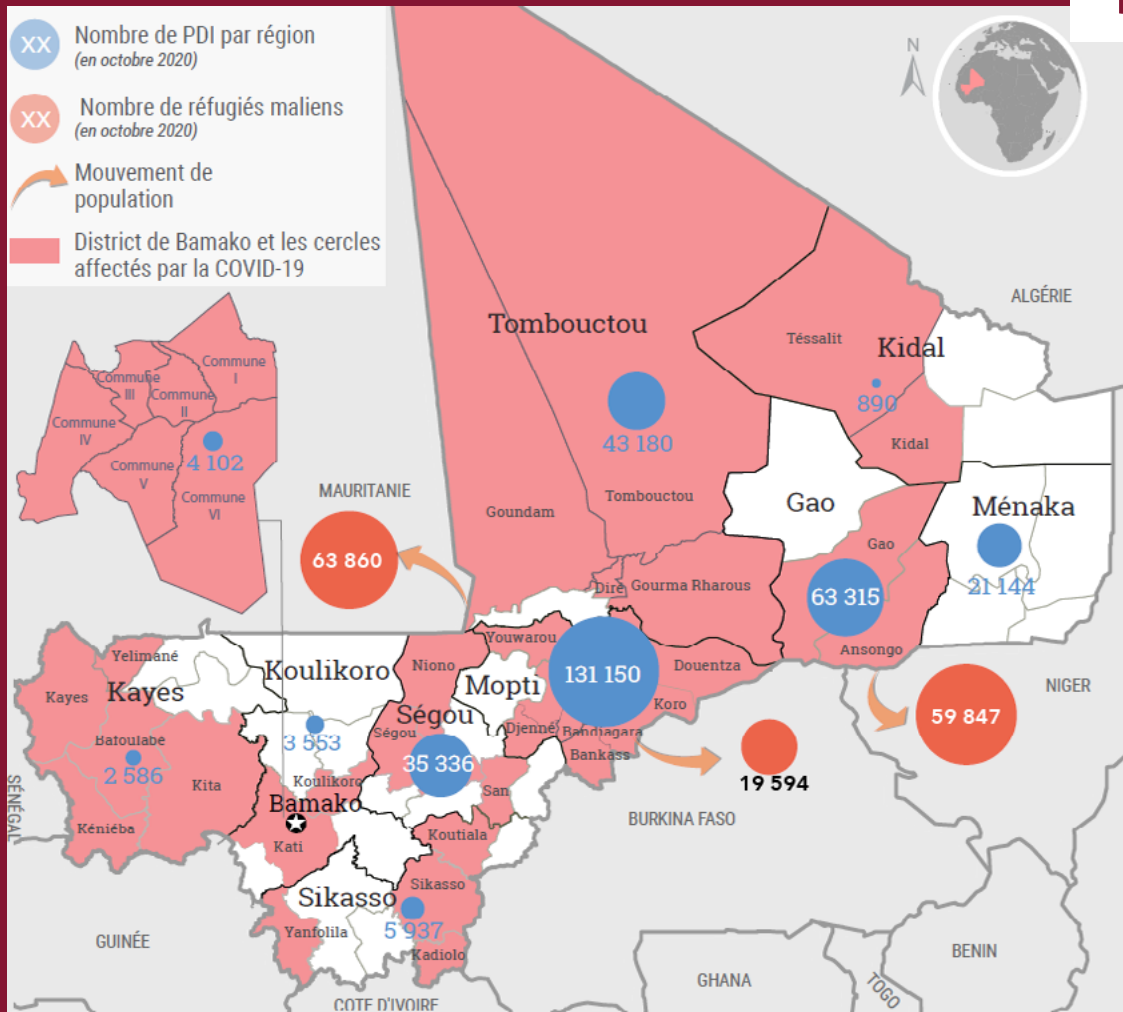
There will be
no military-only
solution to the
complex crisis
in Mali.

The newest French initiative bringing together European and West African nations in the fight against terrorism, the Coalition Sahel, was launched in June 2020. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a mission mandated under Chapter VII of the UN charter and initiated in April 2013, deployed 12,149 military and 1,692 police personnel[10] as of December 2020 and acts on the grounds of UN Security Council Resolution 2531 (2020).[11] MINUSMA's troops are composed mainly of soldiers from the Global South, many from regional troop-contributing countries such as Chad and Burkina Faso, further emphasising the regional turn in UN peacekeeping (Müller and Steinke 2020).

Additionally to French, UN and African militaries, the European Union, emerging as a key security actor in the region (Moe 2020), upholds two missions in Mali: the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), a 745 soldier strong multinational military mission to train the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali), with 136 staff equipped to train Malian police forces.[12] Altogether, more than 15.000 foreign military and police personnel, along with a larger number of private security contractors protecting embassies, foreign businesses and institutions, are based within the confines of the Malian state.

While there are some tactical wins,[13] most of these military actions suffer from a lack of overall positive results. By January 2020, French President Macron "had recognized the relative ineffectiveness of intervention as well as its fragile local legitimacy" (Tull 2021). As one interviewee noted, similar to Afghanistan in the 2000s, there are now "foreign forces stuck in a conflict they cannot win", fighting against hydras[14] in Mali.

Jihadist groups active in Mali, including the Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), Ansar Dine or The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM) – a coalition of groups aligned to al-Qaeda – are a factor but are by no means the only problem, which is why there is broad agreement that there will be no military-only solution to the complex crisis in Mali: "The current escalation of violent conflict has, without doubt, been triggered by the presence of jihadist groups. However, as social order deteriorated, misguided responses by security forces and the growing escalation of intercommunal conflicts (often involving self-defence militias) have become as much a source of violence and instability as the jihadist groups themselves" (Lierl 2020).

# The Triple Nexus in Practice and its challenges in Mali

The current situation in the West African country is a case in point for why the concept of the Triple Nexus was brought to new life in 2016: a protracted crisis with overlapping scenarios of conflict – interethnic violence fuelled by scarcity of resources, secessionists movements in the north of Mali and jihadist violence capitalising on the other conflicts and the power vacuum left by weak state authority, all exacerbate humanitarian needs and decelerate development prospects. It is those violent conflicts, especially the threats deriving from jihadist activities in Mali and the whole Central Sahel region, that differentiate the particular protracted crisis in Mali from others.

In the Malian context, the efforts to implement integration, coherence and coordination to jointly work towards collective outcomes were driven by UN actors: the stabilisation unit of MINUSMA, UNDP and UNOCHA. In 2017, a Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team (STAIT)[15] mission recommended more engagement in this area. Non-UN institutions like the World Bank and donor countries followed.

## A Politicised Triple Nexus Debate in Mali

The on-going degradation of security and the overall convergence of geopolitical interests, together with an extremely volatile and militarised context of intervention described above, result in a highly polarised debate surrounding the Triple Nexus. Overall, the interpretation of what the Triple Nexus entails diverges widely between a range of actors, depending on organisational knowledge on the topic, organisational goals and individual career biographies.

The debate suffers from a variety of challenges, of which five are going to be briefly discussed in what follows: conceptional coherence, international coordination, an overlap of mandates, as well as civil-military relations and funding.

## Conceptional Incoherence

First of all, there is conceptional incoherence with regard to the HDP Nexus. This is not unique to the specific context in Mali, but to some part applicable to the overall debate surrounding the Triple Nexus. "Everybody is defining his own nexus", a MINUSMA representative stated in an interview.[16] Some interpret the Nexus' core to be "working in professional ways" or see it as a chance to capitalise on the "Four Cs": coherence, complementarity, coordination, or respective comparative advantages. Others think that a "Do No Harm" approach properly operationalised, if not entirely congruent, would already achieve major parts of Triple Nexus requirements. Some see the Triple Nexus as it is put in practice in Mali as rather an overlap of the two double nexuses: the humanitarian-development Nexus and the security-development Nexus.

The general advantages and positive synergies of working coherently were unanimously shared among the interviewees. "Should we not do our programming in a way that possibly contributes to peace?", was asked by the head of a double-mandated organisation. It was the peace aspect of the triangle though, especially its blurred boundaries of stabilisation, security and counter-terrorism, that was problematized by many among the stakeholders interviewed. The third leg of the Triple Nexus triangle was seen leaning rather heavily towards conceptions of security and/or stabilisation than towards peace in Mali.

## International Coordination

Focus group discussions with international actors in Bamako showed that the Triple Nexus is largely perceived as a UN-driven concept in Mali. An assessment corroborated this when looking at respective UN resolutions. UN Security Council resolution 2480 from July 2019 for example rolls out MINUSMAs task to "ensure coherence of international efforts, in close collaboration with other bilateral partners, donors and international organizations, including the European Union, engaged in these fields, to rebuild the Malian security sector". From the vantage point of international coordination, the UN spearheaded the process of implementing the Triple Nexus approach. In 2017, shortly after the World Humanitarian Summit, there was a great level of uncertainty on the meanings and shapes of the Triple Nexus that persist to this day. To define the Nexus at a sectorial level, studies and evaluations have been commissioned clustering humanitarian, development and peace actors into thematic groups. In the case of Mali, the questions of and challenges to coordination are intertwined with leadership questions. For many interviewees, leadership on Triple Nexus-related questions was distributed among the wrong set of institutions.

The current situation in the West African country is a case in point for why the concept of the Triple Nexus was brought to new life in 2016.

Figure C:
Attacked Ogossagou Peulh village, Mopti, 18 February 2020.
Source: Daouda Maïga, Imadel NGO.

C

The foundations of humanitarian work are nearly overturned by false or misused interpretations of the Nexus.

The UN MINUSMA stabilisation unit co-coordinated the most important international steering committee, the Technical and Financial Partner Coordination, PTF (Partenaires Techniques et Financiers) together with the French embassy, more specifically its Commission for the Rehabilitation of Post-Conflict Zones (Commission Réhabilitation Zones Post-Conflits CRZPC), – inaugurated in 2013. While MINUSMA representatives state that they would be involved "but not with a MINUSMA hat," many organisations, especially humanitarian actors, regard this synergy as an unfortunate overlap of interests, jeopardising the neutrality of humanitarian interventions. "The foundations of humanitarian work are nearly overturned by false or misused interpretations of the Nexus," one humanitarian stated. All major stakeholders in Mali, the Government of Mali, the UN, France and other European donor governments, are interested in the Triple Nexus, yet, this doesn't translate into "an interest for the Nexus and its implementation, but specific topics are transported via the Nexus to exert pressure. That is the biggest problem we are dealing with at the moment", another humanitarian representative stated.

Furthermore, the potentially conflicting roles of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator, who, apart from this function, at the same time also serves as the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General of MINUSMA, the UN Resident Coordinator and the UNDP Resident Representative, was a source of on-going contestations. While this overlap is not unique to the Malian mission, but a result of the UN's reform agenda towards better-integrated missions in general (Marín 2017), this "four-hatted" role poses many challenges to the coordination of Triple Nexus discussions and activities. Dividing the leadership on Nexus questions between MINUSMA, its stabilisation unit and the French embassy was a mistake from the beginning, according to some humanitarian actors. Humanitarians and development institutions should have been in the driver's seat of the discussion instead.

Humanitarians also lament missing counterparts in the development domain, which some describe as little coordinated. As they are the ones most vocal about potential conflicts surrounding the Triple Nexus, there is a huge amount of pressure and expectation aimed at humanitarians at a coordination level. "We are already more engaged in the debate than the rest, exceeding our mandate with all the meetings, discussions and papers. I don't see the same commitment on the development side and the government", stated a representative of a UN organisation.

Apart from coordination issues, there are some more fundamental obstacles to the successful implementation of Triple Nexus activities. According to UN interviewees, there is an overall lack of understanding of the nature of the humanitarian principles, also within the UN system; while similarly pointing out that in some instances UN military shows better regard for and understanding of the humanitarian principles than some development actors or representatives of donor governments.

In September 2019, the situation could only be described as a "dead-lock", with seemingly insurmountable barriers between different antagonized groups, caused by personal dissonances as much as organisational red lines. A profound lack of trust between humanitarians and other institutional actors was apparent. The issues described above resulted in more hesitation and even refusal to get involved in coordination efforts as envisioned by the Nexus policy. Instead of enhancing the coherence and comparative advantages between different sectors, the original intentions of the Triple Nexus, the way it was pushed for in Mali disintegrated the sectors even more. Principled, single-mandate humanitarian organisations were in particularly strong opposition of possible Triple Nexus activities in the Malian context.

## Overlap of mandates – counter-terrorism and stabilisation

One reason for the difficulties encountered by the UN stabilisation mission MINUSMA lies in the overlap of mandates and responsibilities of the different intervening parties. While the French-led Operation Barkhane was tasked with counterinsurgency, MINUSMA's efforts are aimed at stabilisation and peace. Yet, MINUSMA's mandated support to Operation Barkhane via G5 Sahel (joint forces of Niger, Chad, Mauretania, Burkina Faso and Mali) lies at the heart of the perception of MINUSMA's partiality held by NSAG actors and parts of the Malian population (Charbonneau 2019). This perception directly translates into attacks on MINUSMA forces. Of the 231 people killed during mission, 134 fell victim to directed attacks, the majority of which came from African troop contributors. This is the second-highest number in the history of UN peacekeeping, exceeded only by the 1960s UN mission to Congo (ONUC).[17] Currently, MINUSMA is considered the most dangerous peacekeeping mission deployed.[18]

Consequently, MINUSMA spends 80% of its 1.2 billion annual budget on its own protection and security (Tull 2019). Soldiers are bunkered down in highly secured military compounds in Bamako, Gao or Mopti. Rather than being a factor of stability, MINUSMA has turned into a target itself. Next to the overall degradation of security as a factor, one reason for the mission's vulnerability is the engagement of the UN in counter-terrorism, initiated by 9/11 and the subsequent Global War on Terror (GWOT). In 2017, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism was founded. UNSC Resolution 2391 then laid the foundation for MINUSMA's support of the FC G5 Sahel, supporting French-led Operation Barkhane and its counter-terrorism agenda through the backdoor. "Too many U.N. peace operations are being asked to materially support counter-terrorism operations, risking the impartiality of the U.N. and exposing blue helmets and other agencies to reprisals"[19], experts conclude.

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Next to the overall degradation of security as a factor, one reason is to be found in the engagement of the UN in counter-terrorism.

European policy towards the Sahel is laser-focused on security and counter-terrorism.

For the implementation of Triple Nexus activities, or even Nexus-thinking, this shift has dire consequences. For NGOs to be associated with the UN, e.g. via its Quick Impact Projects (QIPs)[20], can pose inherent threats to humanitarian access and the safety and security of their own staff and that of their partner organisations. Acts of violence against aid workers, such as shootings, theft and abduction are regularly reported. Joining forces and activities under the umbrella of collective outcomes with UN organisations in Mali comes with repercussions, not solely but especially for humanitarians. "Integration thus fosters the view that humanitarian aid, particularly within a UN-led response, has become a vector of Western values and a component in the War on Terror" (DuBois 2016: 11). While the Malian population has broadly applauded the French military intervention, requested by the Malian government (Tull 2020), and also the UN mission in the beginning, public support is in decline. People are protesting MINUSMA, questioning the inability of the UN to protect civilians as well as Barkhane for what is perceived as neo-colonial Franceafrique[21] approach of the French-led military alliances (Pigeaud 2020; Bergamaschi, Chafer, and Charbonneau 2014). The frustration with the French presence in the country was articulated in the popular protest preceding the coup against president IBK.

France is not the only country that has vested interests in West Africa. To the European Council "security is the first condition for development" (European Council 2003). The Cotonou Agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific states, especially its 2005 revision, puts a strong emphasis on security and counter-terrorism and respective regulations that states have to comply with in order to be eligible for development funds. "By stressing political conditionality through the Cotonou agreement, the EU attempted to formalize its new, comprehensive approach to security through development" (Anderson and John Williams 2011).

With the beginning of the crisis in 2012, the EU has started to consider the Sahel as "part of the EU's extended neighbourhood" (Venture Alassane Toure 2020). The European aid assistance to Mali after the 2012 coup d'état, a set-back from what at least theoretically was meant to be a less aid-based new partnership-cooperation approach, was highly influenced by European security concerns (Furness and Gänzle 2016). "The Sahel is a strategic priority for the EU" (EU Council 2019). This priority translates into the fact that European policy towards the Sahel is laser-focused on security and counter-terrorism. The European involvement in Mali is contextualised with the containment of the jihadist threat in the Sahel region. Preventing the Sahel from becoming an Islamist stronghold serving as a gateway hub to terrorist attacks in the EU is of seminal importance. Secondly, not only possible terrorist threats, but also the migration of people fleeing from jihadist violence and its economic effects, should be contained.

## Civil-military coordination

As a consequence of the dynamics portrayed above, one major factor negative-ly weighing on the probabilities of the Triple Nexus is the increasing blurring of lines between civilian and military interveners – a dynamic of general concern in most contexts of international intervention that accelerates in the Malian context due to the complex variety of armed actors and divergence of interests. Especially through the QIPs, mentioned above, military actors intend to use "humanitarian interventions to build military acceptance," stated a Head of Mission of the inter-national NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (The New Humanitarian 2019). What is more, both Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA have undertaken humanitarian needs assessments and provided security to humanitarians in the past years (Tronc et al. 2019). To ensure shorter communication channels and possible coordination, representatives of European donor governments do have civilian liaison personnel embedded with the troops of their respective countries.[22]

One thing repeatedly brought into the discussion was the question of whether or not there should be increased cooperation between MINUSMA troops and human-itarian actors in terms of access. One scenario would be that the military enters a specific region to make it accessible for humanitarians to come and provide assis-tance. Principled actors articulated a clear stand against this practice. "This idea of an Ilot de Stabilité is a medieval idea. It doesn't work because it doesn't build on a common understanding between opposition groups," commented the head of a European donor institution. To that point, "opposition groups" do not exclude ji-hadist groups. There has been intense debate around the necessity of engaging in dialogue with this particular set of actors (Li 2020; Crisis Group 2019).

The association with MINUSMA bares risk also for UN staff. Military escorts by MI-NUSMA rather increase the risk for UN civilian agencies to be attacked. Yet without escorts, they are not allowed to enter high-risk regions, resulting in their absence in many parts of the country (Marín 2017; The New Humanitarian 2019). The security advisor of a German INGO explained why his organization should not make use of the MINUSMA compound in Gao with the perception by jihadist groups: "They don't make a difference between NGO and the military, everyone who enters and leaves this compound is considered an enemy". Humanitarian NGOs are in the catch-22 position of having to declare that they have access to certain regions marked by high levels of violence to receive funding while actually being either forced into practices like remote management with considerable trade-offs such as risk trans-fer, negotiating access with jihadist groups (Crisis Group 2019), or being associated with or relying on international military actors to clear and secure certain areas for NGOs to provide immediate assistance.

Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA have undertaken humanitarian needs assessments and provided security to humanitarians in the past years.

Humanitarian NGOs are in the catch-22 position.

Another factor complicating the ability of NGOs to differentiate themselves from military actors is the increasing practices of low flag missions. The trademark humanitarian Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) are not marked with the logos of organisations in Mali to protect the passengers from attacks, turning the market logic of humanitarianism with its visibility being its prime currency upside down. The problem is that MINUSMA, as well as Operation Barkhane, are using the same style of unmarked vehicles, making them indistinguishable from humanitarian actors and vice versa (The New Humanitarian 2019; Marín 2017).

Above that, people working for INGOs, the UN and other foreign institutions come into the countries via the same hubs (and leave them similarly when the security situation necessitates it), frequent the same places in the country and occupy the same "humanitarian space" (Smirl 2015). Despite their differences in sectors and individual backgrounds, and also their eagerness to differentiate themselves from each other, interveners form a community of practice (Autesserre 2014). Under these circumstances, it is hard for populations to distinguish between the plethora of foreign interveners. It is not only the Malian population that is troubled by the multitude of involved groups: "There are more and more actors, and we don't know their agendas," a representative of an iNGO stated.

All of those objections do not mean there should be no contact between military and civilian actors whatsoever. Yet, according to interviewees, the lines should be much clearer. They rather opt for an improvement of coordination between military and civilian actors on such activities to make sure their styles and zones of intervention stay distinct from each other.

It is not just the relationship to armed actors that is of concern, but also the relationship with the Malian government that is problematized when it comes to Triple Nexus programming. Within the figurations of the crisis that accelerated in 2012, the Malian Government was party to the conflict. Yet, MINUSMA is mandated to support the Malian Government to "re-establish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali" as well as "to support the Government's efforts for the effective restoration and extension of State authority and rule of law throughout the territory". Particularly for protection actors associated with a state being party to the conflict means a "reduced ability to conduct protection monitoring and independently document alleged violations of international law by state actors" (Lilly 2020, 9). This is equally valid for MINUSMA protection officers.

Despite their differences in sectors and individual backgrounds, and also their eagerness to differentiate themselves from each other, interveners form a community of practice.

# Funding

As to the last point, many hoped for the Triple Nexus as a programming tool to integrate more flexibility into donor financing mechanisms, mainly relevant concerning the humanitarian-development nexus. While NGO stakeholders in Mali broadly welcomed the latter, adding a third element – peace – to the equation was met with high levels of scepticism. In June 2019, the Forum des ONG internationals au Mali (FONGIM) published a position paper on the Triple Nexus, cautioning its members against the securitisation paradigm connected to Nexus programming in the Malian context (FONGIM 2019).[23] This position was signed by half of the members of the forum. Later, the Groupe Technique Assistance/Action Humanitaire (GTAH) of FONGIM published another note regarding funding from MINUSMA (specifically the QIPs) and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), stating: "Accepting such a funding that conceals neither its political agenda, nor the modalities it implies, goes against humanitarian principles, specifically the neutrality and independence of the aid sector" (FONGIM 2019).[24]

In 2019, FONGIM/GTAH was headed by NRC and Oxfam representatives in Mali. While both organisations have published reports characterising the Triple Nexus as an opportunity (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019; Poole and Culbert 2019), accepting such funding in Mali is seen as endangering the overall reputation of NGOs in the country, making NGO staff a target for violent attacks as well as restricting access to the most vulnerable populations. EUTF was initiated as a direct reaction to the so-called migration crisis as one of the "flagship deliverables of the Valletta Summit held on 11 and 12 of November 2015" (Hauck et al. 2015). It finances so-called migration partnerships that "bind development aid to conditions, namely improved migration management and taking back refugees and migrants" (Welthungerhilfe and terre des hommes 2019).

Thus, the financing mechanism of the EUTF is not seen as needs-based but as part of European migration regimes, ultimately aiming to avert migration to the EU. Notwithstanding those positions, many among the signatory organisations of the FONGIM paper decided to respond to the EUTF call nevertheless. "If we don't do it, others who don't have the same legitimacy will take the money and do it", a NGO Country Director of a Sahel country stated pointing out the competition over funds and otherwise scarce funding.

Others opted for even more intensified collaboration, unionising of INGOS vis-à-vis donor governments: "The more often organisations are addressing donors, the more they speak with one voice, with one criticism, the more influence we will have in the future. If we don't do it, they will do what they want anyway" comments a representative of a UN organisation. Another representative went further to say "Why don't they instruct the donors? Train the donors instead of pleasing them. Do pedagogy instead of diplomacy."

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## Outlook

Because of the high level of complexity and the divergences of interests of the different actors involved, the Triple Nexus is highly contested in Mali. Even the UN coordinators initially promoting the Triple Nexus approach proposed dropping the term in Mali after all. "A lot of people start to be very angry" when the Triple Nexus is mentioned in debates and coordination circles, a MINUSMA representative reported. Some consider this to be merely a semantic makeover – doing Triple Nexus activities but giving them a different name. "Words change but intentions don't," as one interviewee claimed. Others see it as a compromise – there are so many challenges to implementing the Double Nexus alone, "why not strengthen the Double Nexus with a focus on social cohesion?" inquired a humanitarian. In Mali, rather than discussing peace as a third element to an already challenging humanitarian-development nexus, the practicalities revolved around the proximity between the security-development nexus as promoted by all major stakeholders and the humanitarian-development nexus.

While a plethora of consultants have inquired about the state of the argument concerning the nexus in Mali during the past two years, there is growing frustration on all sides of the frontline with the abstractness of the debate. "I have seen enough paper, we need concrete projects," a UN humanitarian stated. Yet, at least during this research, there was little practical thought on the peace element of the Triple Nexus that was not subsumed or overwhelmed by stabilisation or security aspects. Shifting the international focus from militarisation to provision of basic services in neglected areas as proposed by the Head of UN OCHA Mali might be a first step to rectify the debate. This falls in line with what DuBois has suggested as Nexus-thinking "to better address rather than dismiss the most important needs of people" (2020). During this research, several stakeholders wished for a shift to a more thorough diplomatic engagement, particularly from Germany, for example, to help strengthen and reform the 2015 peace agreement instead of fuelling the militarisation of the conflict.

Nexus-thinking might also mean redefining security not in a militarised way, but focussing on human security, food security, justice, rule of law, and protection of civilians. As Mohammed Ibn Chambas, United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UN SRSG ) for West Africa and the Sahel and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), commented on the multifaceted crisis in Sahel: security-related spending is crowding out funding in other sectors such as health and education. Taking that into account for donors would mean readjusting funding towards humanitarian and development needs, as demanded by a UN humanitarian in Mali in 2019.

Putting a focus on access challenges, for example, would come with a series of trade-offs and implications that have to be weighed against the potentials of delivering assistance. It would mean to transparently discuss the implications of only sending humanitarian staff not perceived as Western to specific hard-to-access areas, practically profiling staff along the lines of "non-professional criteria, including nationality, skin colour, gender and religion" (Duroch and Neumann 2021) in terms of hierarchisation, discrimination and, last but not least, risk transfer. Discussing humanitarian access under a Triple Nexus agenda would mean improving capacities in conflict analysis and humanitarian negotiations with NSAGs, an overall significant improvement in civil-military coordination with the plethora of armed interveners in the country as well as a need for sound firewalls to counter-terrorism operations, comprehensible to all the actors involved, including the Malian population.

Gilles Olakounlé Yabi, founder of the West African think tank WATHI, advised the citizens of West African countries that the imperative has to be to resist permanent distraction "which distances them from the resolute pursuit, on a daily basis, of the efforts to build states and the civilian and military human resources that animate them. The distraction that prevents us from thinking, planning, organising and acting with a minimum of autonomy" (Yabi 2021). For Yabi this also entails the never-ending debates on the failures and prospects of European (military) intervention in the region.

This might be sound advice for the actors stuck in the apparent deadlock with seemingly insurmountable differences in the discussion and practicalities on the Triple Nexus, too. One way might be to further analyse and investigate the prospects of integrated humanitarian-development programming that contributes to social cohesion, like what is already applied by a series of NGOs in Mali and beyond. Some organisations are taking a pragmatic approach, focusing on food security and provision as a contributing factor to build trust between authorities and community. Others focus on job-generating activities, vocational training and livelihood programmes.

Another way – at least for multi-mandated non-governmental organisations – would be to investigate the potential of a civilian nexus (Südhoff, Hövelmann, and Steinke 2020). Nexus activities would be implemented in partnership with local peace actors and mediators with the highest level of local legitimacy and ownership possible, while the engagement with contested actors and funding as outlined above would be limited to the lowest level possible.

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# Endnotes

1      The interviews took place in September 2019 in Bamako, Mali and involved a wide range of actors: representatives of national and international NGOs, of UN civilian agencies and of MINUSMA, of European donor governments, altogether 43 interviews as well as three focus group discussion with stakeholders.

2      The term Tuareg is not an emic term. Instead, Imushagh is used by these groups to refer to themselves in Mali (Kohl 2016).

3      The term "jihadist groups" subsumes very complex figurations of actors with partly differing objectives, compositions and allegiances, see: (Li 2020; Crisis Group 2019; Raineri and Strazzari 2017; Diallo 2017).

4      https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/13/ecowas-confident-of-mali-s-return-to-civilian-rule-before-18-month-deadline/

5      https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/

6      https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

7      https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/299-course-correction-sahel-stabilisation-strategy

8      https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3896411?ln=en

9      https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/589-killed-central-mali-so-far-2020-security-worsens-bachelet

10     https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma

11     https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2531(2020)

12     For a comprehensive critique see, in German https://peacelab.blog/2018/05/wie-geht-ertuechtigung-nicht-erfahrungen-aus-mali

13     https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/01/counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-can-task-force-takuba-be-a-game-changer-for-france/

14     https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/01/counter-terrorism-in-the-sahel-can-task-force-takuba-be-a-game-changer-for-france/

15     https://www.unocha.org/our-work/coordination/peer-2-peer-support-project

16     Research interviews with representatives of national, international NGOs, international donor institutions and representatives of UN agencies and MINUSMA have been conducted in September 2019 in Bamako, Mali.

17     https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats_by_mission_incident_type_4_58_dec2020.pdf

18     Also the French forces suffered significant losses, 51 soldiers since 2013. As one of the results "Paris seeks to balance a lighter military footprint with counter-terrorism goals, the continued internationalization of intervention, and more local responsibility" (see Tull 2021).

19     https://www.justsecurity.org/69588/un-counter-terrorism-negotiations-during-covid-time-for-a-rethink/

20     Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) are trademark UN projects with a financial volume of up to 50 000 USD, often implemented in collaboration with (I)NGOs and UN soldiers with the aim of harmonising the population with the presence of foreign peacekeepers.

21     Franceafrique is a term that seeks to describe the continuity of France's influence over formerly colonised African territory.

22     GIZ representatives are embedded with German MINUSMA troops, AFD representatives with French Barkhane soldiers.

23     Note de positionnement du fongim sur le nexus, 2019

24     GTAH Letter of Stabilization Funding, 2019

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CMA | Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad |
| COIN | Counterinsurgency |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 19 |
| CRZPC | Commission Réhabilitation Zones Post-Conflits |
| EU | European Union |
| EUCAP | European Union Capacity Building Mission |
| EUTF | European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa |
| EUTM | European Training Mission |
| FAMa | Forces armées maliennes |
| FONGIM | Forum des Organisations Non-Gouvernementales internationales au Mali |
| GTAH | Groupe Technique Assistance/Action Humanitaire |
| GWOT | Global War on Terror |
| HDP | Humanitarian-Development-Peace |
| IDP | Internally Displaced Person |
| IPC | Integrated Food Security Phase Classification |
| JNIM | Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen |
| LRRD | Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development |
| MINUSMA | Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali |
| MSF | Médecins Sans Frontières |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NSAG | Non-state armed groups |
| ONUC | Opération des Nations Unies au Congo |
| PTF | Partenaires techniques et financiers |
| QIP | Quick Impact Project |
| SUV | Sports Utility Vehicle |
| STAIT | Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team |
| UN | United Nations |
| UN OCHA | The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| UN SG | United Nations Secretary General |
| UN SRSG | United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| UNOWAS | United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel |

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