

Contested Triple Nexus – Examples from Mali

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OVERVIEW

In 2016, the United Nations (UN) initiated the call for an integrated approach linking humanitarian, development, and peace efforts, also known as the Triple Nexus, urging different sectors to work together towards common objectives. Yet, depending on the context, this seemingly basic premise poses a variety of challenges to the actors involved. The volatile, militarised, and controversial context of intervention in Mali is a case in point to discuss these challenges. Therefore, the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) invited around 20 representatives from INGOs and think tanks, as well as representatives from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) and the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to the roundtable “Contested Triple Nexus – Examples from Mali”.

By presenting various perspectives from Mali, including those of civil society, humanitarian actors, the UN and NGOs, this event aimed at discerning the opportunities and pitfalls of integrated Triple Nexus activities in Mali. Additionally, it sought to better understand what the Malian case could mean for the feasibility of the Triple Nexus in general.

Anaïde L. Nahikian, Program Manager at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, discussed [the local perspectives on peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian action in Mali](#). Ms Nahikian’s input was based on the qualitative research undertaken by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative’s Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action (ATHA). The ATHA’s research draws upon interviews with the Malian government officials, non-state armed groups, civil society, international and local humanitarian agencies, activists, journalists, private sector, diplomats, beneficiaries, and displaced populations.

Dr Andrea Steinke, Research Fellow at the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA), highlighted the challenges to the coordination and funding of Triple Nexus activities in Mali. Dr Steinke’s presentation was based on CHA’s research project “Nexus in Practice”, of which Mali is one of the case studies. As part of this study, CHA conducted interviews with various actors in Bamako, including international and Malian NGOs, representatives of European governments, members of MINUSMA, and other security providers.

The presentations were followed by a discussion moderated by **Ralf Südhoff**, Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Disintegration of sectors. Instead of integrating and harmonizing humanitarian-development-peace sectors towards collective outcomes, the Triple Nexus approach in Mali has contributed to the disintegration of the sectors even more.

NWOW and Triple Nexus – new names for the old ways? Attempts to integrate different sectors, especially humanitarian action and development cooperation, have been undertaken before. The “New Way of Working” (NWOW), as outlined in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, could therefore be interpreted as a reframing of old-standing efforts. At the same time, there is no clear evidence that the Triple Nexus approach is working.

“Peace” component and the risk of “securitising” the Triple Nexus. In recent years, conflict dynamics in Mali and elsewhere have evolved, with crises becoming increasingly complex. Adding the “peace” component to the Triple Nexus is an acknowledgement that NGO actors are in this for the long run. However, it is not entirely clear whether the “third leg” of the Triple Nexus focuses on peace or on security, and experts warn against the “securitisation” of the Triple Nexus, i.e. the co-optation of other fields by the security sector. These concerns are raised by initiatives such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which envisions “a closer collaboration between humanitarian, development and security actors”, essentially reflecting a securitised approach to migration management.

Lack of clarity on the Triple Nexus and the collective outcomes. The research conducted in Mali illustrates a general lack of understanding regarding the Triple Nexus, its scope and its goals. While some define the Triple Nexus as a call for a stronger coordination between different sectors, other organisations feel obliged to get involved in all three sectors themselves. It is also unclear who should define the collective outcomes, and in whose interest these outcomes should be achieved.

Humanitarian soul-searching. Working within the Triple Nexus framework raises questions concerning the trade-offs between humanitarian principles and pragmatism. As the Malian case shows, the Triple Nexus approach carries the risk of shrinking humanitarian space. For instance, it remains unclear how the Triple Nexus should be implemented in areas controlled by non-state actors. Moreover, many humanitarian organisations are double-mandate organisations, constantly switching between humanitarianism and development, which might make upholding the humanitarian principles more challenging. During the discussion, it was pointed out that humanitarian organisations having an “endgame”, i.e. making themselves redundant when acute crisis is over, might make their engagement more meaningful.

Localisation of aid – still difficult to achieve. Despite all positive intentions, the Mali example underlines that local voices and practices are not integrated into programme designs and implementations in a meaningful way. Organisations should ask themselves how much focus is placed on locals when defining their needs. Donor governments should also become more active in enabling the localisation as the local ownership over aid resources is lacking. The African continent is generally seen as a problem to be fixed by the donors, which urgently calls for a change of perspective.

Coordination issues. The research in Mali demonstrates that the internal bureaucracies of organisations are difficult to navigate, as there is a lack of internal coherence and the information flow is insufficient. Additionally, it remains difficult to navigate the relationship between organisational guidelines and the autonomy of field staff. The Malian case also shows that the plurality of actors from different sectors complicates international coordination and cooperation. Especially the role of the UN, perceived as a conflict target if not a conflict party itself by some Malian actors, has made Triple Nexus matters more complicated in Mali. The “four-hatted role” of the Humanitarian Coordinator, who, apart from this function, also represents the UNDP, is Deputy to the Special Representative of the Secretary-general of MINUSMA and acts as UN Resident Coordinator, is just one example of the challenges connected to coordination in Mali.

Funding problematics. Donors are creating siloed incentives as there are not enough funding lines properly enabling Nexus activities. At the same time though, NGOs feel obliged to refer to the “Nexus” in order to receive funding – even if one donor government official who participated in the discussion argued that mentioning the “Nexus” is not a precondition for funding. During the discussion it was also noted that feedback from the NGO community is crucial. However, organisations might be afraid to speak their minds in order not to jeopardise funding. A related problematic aspect is “working to work”, i.e. working to get the funding to do the work. As a result, the sight of the populations’ needs is often lost in the process. Lastly, it is important to critically evaluate for which funds NGOs are applying. Here, especially the EUTF is under scrutiny, as it “conceals neither its political agenda, nor the modalities it implies”, and therefore “goes against humanitarian principles, specifically the neutrality and independence of the aid sector”, as the Forum of International NGOs in Mali (FONGIM) cautions.

Lack of trust. The Triple Nexus debate in Mali shows that there is a lack of trust between a multitude of actors, such as between recipients and donors; between NGOs and local actors/communities; between different NGOs; between different sectors; and between international and national levels. To tackle this lack of trust, it is crucial to address power imbalances in the donor-recipient relationship and, as mentioned before, to enable meaningful localisation.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- What kind of humanitarian action is required to deal with the complexity of today’s crises?
- Are humanitarians making it too easy for themselves by solely recurring to the humanitarian principles in difficult and volatile contexts?
- Given that most NGOs are double-mandated, what does this mean for the Triple Nexus approach?
- Whose interests play the most important role in contexts like Mali? Who has the prerogative to define the collective outcomes, and who should have it?
- What is the role of the governments in the Triple Nexus approach?
- If humanitarian actors do not want to collaborate with military actors, who should they collaborate with? What about national peace actors?
- Who or what is “the local” and what kind of power structures might be behind it/them?
- How should the Triple Nexus be addressed, without contributing to a dynamic of everyone including it into their projects?

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