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HDP NEXUS PROGRAMMING IN THE SAHEL: PARTNERING FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL AND AID LANDSCAPE

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SUMMARY

● The evolving geopolitical landscape in the Central Sahel, persistent insecurity and declining international aid are challenging approaches to the humanitarian–development–peacebuilding (HDP) nexus. Focusing on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, this research policy paper examines how international actors can sustain their engagement and promote peace amid political fragmentation and constrained operating environments.

Drawing on academic and policy literature, as well as interviews with international humanitarian and development actors, the paper identifies opportunities and challenges peacebuilding. It argues that the HDP nexus remains relevant but requires more pragmatic, politically modest and context-sensitive implementation.

International interventions should support local efforts to manage, resolve or transform community-level direct and structural violence, while connecting these efforts to the wider peacebuilding architecture. This means supporting conditions in which locally grounded peace can emerge and endure while remaining attentive to local inequalities and the wider political and structural forces that shape what is possible at the community level.

I. Introduction

The Sahel faces complex interconnected crises as violent conflict, climate shocks, food insecurity, economic distress and weak governance undermine social cohesion and resilience in the region. At the same time, the Sahel is undergoing a profound geopolitical realignment. Changes in Sahelian political leadership, shifting alliances with external actors, shrinking international aid budgets and increasing scrutiny of international engagement are reshaping both the operating environment and the architecture of assistance. Donors need to reassess their approach to cooperation. International humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) actors, including United Nations agencies, need to rethink their modes of engagement in a context of increased regional political fragmentation, mistrust of the organizations and policies associated with former Western colonial powers and pressure to deliver more sustainable outcomes with fewer resources.[1]

These compounding internal and external realities further expose the limitations of siloed HDP interventions. Despite the nexus fatigue among international HDP actors and donors after a decade of policy commitments, they also accentuate the need to embed conflict sensitivity, social cohesion and peace-promoting outcomes in humanitarian and development programming. This creates renewed urgency and imperatives for collaboration, prioritization and locally anchored long-term approaches that can address immediate needs, strengthen resilience and reduce the drivers of conflict.[2]

What does this look like in practice in 'politically estranged settings' such as the Sahel? Where and how can international humanitarian and aid actors find spaces where peacebuilding is feasible? These questions underpin the evidence partnership between the Stockholm International Peace Research

[1] Koné, F. R. and Zahar, M.-J., *Engaging with Sahelian Transitions: Changing Political and Geostrategic Context Calls for a New Approach* (International IDEA: Stockholm, 2026); and Baudais, V., *Military Entrenchment in Mali and Niger: Praetorianism in Retrospect* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute: Stockholm, 2024).

[2] Lilly, D. and Scott, R., *10 Years On: Time to Double Down on the HDP Nexus* (BMZ: Berlin, 2026).

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Box 1. The Sahel Resilience Partnership

The Sahel Resilience Partnership (SRP), funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aligns GIZ's Sahel Resilience Strengthening (SARES) project, UNICEF's Building Resilience in the Sahel (BRS) programme and WFP's Sahel Integrated Resilience Programme (SIRP) in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. GIZ has a development mandate, while UNICEF and WFP have dual humanitarian and development mandates. The purpose of joining these resilience efforts together in a portfolio of interventions is to combine their respective strengths in a coherent, complementary and coordinated fashion. This is expected to enhance impact across four common outcomes linked to the main drivers of fragility in the Sahel: food and nutrition security; climate resilient ecosystems; continuous, shock-resilient social services; and conflict resolution and social cohesion. In 2024, the partnership reached around 6 million people, including 3.6 million women and girls. BMZ has earmarked €130 million for the SRP in 2026.[a]

Source: Bunse S., Delgado C. and Blair R., *From Silos to Synergies: Partnering for Social Cohesion in the Sahel*, SIPRI Policy Paper (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2025).

[a] BMZ, 'Staatssekretär Niels Annen eröffnet "Berlin Process" für Ernährungssicherung im Sahel' [State Secretary Niels Annen launches 'Berlin Process' for food security in the Sahel], Press release, 21 July 2026.

Institute (SIPRI) and the Sahel Resilience Partnership (SRP). The SRP is an HDP-nexus initiative funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by Germany's international development agency, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, UNICEF and WFP (see box 1). The research conducted for the partnership seeks to generate knowledge on how to strengthen SRP contributions to the promotion of social cohesion in the Sahel and operationalize the peace component of the HDP nexus. Drawing on evidence from the SRP, this policy paper builds on the SIPRI publication, *From Silos to Synergies: Partnering for Social Cohesion in the Sahel*',[3] to identify lessons for international stakeholders engaged in HDP programming and donors seeking to remain engaged in the Sahel, find entry points for peacebuilding and advance their localization efforts in increasingly constrained and politically complex environments.

The geographic focus is on the Central Sahel, specifically Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. These are three countries navigating complex governance and institutional challenges, alongside significant dissatisfaction with the outcomes of past international interventions and stabilization efforts. Each has been marked since 2020 by a 'new wave of remilitarization of political power'.[4] The analysis draws on relevant academic and grey literature and is informed by 20 interviews with SRP members and some of their stakeholders.

Section II analyses recent changes in the geopolitical and aid architecture in the Central Sahel and their impact on how international actors can operate. Section III explores how international HDP actors can stay engaged. Section IV discusses entry points for peacebuilding and the connections between localization and peacebuilding. Section V concludes by identifying implications for international donors and HDP actors. The central argument is that the changing Sahel does not invalidate the HDP nexus but requires a more politically modest, locally anchored and operationally integrated version of it. This means moving away from politically ambitious integrated efforts focused on macro political military and development agendas 'from above'

[3] Bunse S., Delgado C. and Blair R., *From Silos to Synergies: Partnering for Social Cohesion in the Sahel*, SIPRI Policy Paper (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute: Stockholm, 2025).

[4] Baudais (note 1).

that treated security as an external technical problem and instead supporting locally grounded efforts to manage, resolve and transform community-level direct and structural violence, while also helping to foster the conditions in which local forms of conflict management, coexistence and social cohesion can emerge and endure.[5]

II. Shifting geopolitical and aid structures in the Central Sahel

This section analyses recent changes in geopolitical and aid structures that suggest that 'normal intergovernmental development cooperation no longer works'.[6] There was a new wave of military coups in Sahelian countries between 2020 and 2023, driven by security failures, an expansion of terrorism, corruption and poor governance, and inadequate public services. In addition, a rupture emerged between a political class supported by the West and citizens who felt that their countries' governments and transition efforts, supported by international donors since the 1990s, had failed to deliver security, stability or development.[7]

As a result, the incoming military regimes began to methodically dismantle the existing security and aid architectures.[8] Historic ties with France and some other Western actors were severed and regional integration became more fragmented.[9] The new regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger ended their military cooperation with France and the UN's stabilization mission in Mali, and scaled back counterterrorism partnerships with the United States and the European Union (EU).[10] In 2024, Chad and Senegal also asked French forces to withdraw, albeit under different circumstances.[11] In addition, Mali left the G5 Sahel Joint Force in 2022, and was followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023.[12]

[5] Hagberg, S., 'Beyond regional radars: Security from below and the rule of law in the Sahel', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2018), pp. 21–37; de Sardan, O. and Zongo, T., 'Pourquoi cet échec stratégique des institutions de développement et des États africains ? Et de quelques pistes pour aller vers des politiques publiques mieux adaptées aux contextes locaux' [Why have development institutions and African states failed strategically? And some avenues for moving to public policies better adapted to local contexts], *Ferdi Working Document* (Fondation pour les études et recherches sur le développement international: Clermont-Ferrand, 2023).

[6] Asche, H., 'Is German Sahel policy at a crossroads?', *Welthungerhilfe Global Food Journal*, Aug. 2024.

[7] Ajala, O., 'Why military solutions keep failing in the Sahel', *Development and Cooperation*, 30 July 2026; Koné and Zahar (note 1); and Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. and Sylla, A., 'The rise of Mali's "videomen" as cybercombatants in global crisis ecologies', *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 4 (July 2024), pp. 1405–29.

[8] Ricard, M. et al., 'Anatomy of a fall: Understanding France's reluctant retreat from the Central Sahel', *Geopolitics*, 22 Jan. 2025.

[9] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Peace and Security Competence Centre sub-Saharan Africa (FES PSCC), *The Sahel Facing Contemporary Geopolitical Challenges and Changes: Towards What Prospects for the Region?* Sahel Sahara Dialogue Report 4th edition, (FES PSCC: Dakar, 2023); and Debenham, C., 'Democracy vs security: Geopolitical realignment in the Sahel', Vision of Humanity, 25 Sep. 2024.

[10] de León Cobo, B., 'Shifting alliances: The Sahel's geostrategic evolution in a multipolar era', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)* Commentary, 13 Sep. 2024; and Fasanotti, F., 'Uncovering the roots of crisis in the Sahel', *Stimson Center*, 24 Mar. 2026.

[11] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Chad* (Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh, 2026).

[12] Sandor, A., Frowd, P. M. and Hönke, J., 'Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa: The case of the G5 Sahel', *European Journal of International Security*, vol.11, no. 1 (2026), pp. 58–76.

Sahelian governments ended Western military security cooperation because they increasingly regarded the existing security partnership as ineffective, intrusive and tied to a lingering colonial relationship. Consequently, the incoming military juntas sought greater sovereignty over their security policies and pursued alternative geopolitical partnerships.[13] Many civil society actors supported efforts to reshape their countries' foreign policy strategies in order to challenge what they perceived as the ongoing influence of neocolonial power structures and the marginalization of their states within the current global order.[14]

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger also left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), exposing deep strategic and free movement-related tensions.[15] They resented post-coup ECOWAS sanctions, border closures and demands to restore democratic rule. The military regimes and some civil society actors perceived ECOWAS as too close to Western powers.[16] According to SIPRI's 2024 perception surveys, over 70 per cent of the people surveyed in Mali and Niger considered leaving ECOWAS to be a good decision.[17] Importantly, anti-colonial narratives are not just linked to the military governments, but part of wider debates around territorial sovereignty, Pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism and economic sovereignty, including within civil society and popular movements.[18]

To counter diplomatic isolation, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a mutual defence pact on safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, and turned to actors without a colonial history in Africa.[19] The security vacuum has been filled by deepening existing partnerships with Russia, primarily through state-backed entities such as the Africa Corps, the successor to the Wagner Group.[20] This has altered counterinsurgency tactics, often leading to a prioritization of militarized, mercenary-backed operations.[21] China, Turkey and various Gulf states have increased investment in infrastructure projects and arms sales, reducing the region's historical economic dependence on Europe.[22] Donors such as the Gulf states, China or Russia typically prioritize infrastructure, security or bilateral assistance over the counterterrorism operations, stabilization

[13] Ricard et al. (note 8).

[14] Sandor, A. and Berlingozzi, L., 'Grassroots geopolitical imaginaries in the Sahel: Civil society security narratives in Burkina Faso and Niger', *Geopolitics*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2025), pp. 1400–28.

[15] Minko, A. E., 'On shifting sands in Africa's Sahel region: Tensions between security and free movement', *Migration Policy Institute*, 20 Aug. 2025.

[16] Ewokor, C., 'Three military-run states leave West African bloc: What will change?', BBC News, 29 Jan. 2025.

[17] Baudais (note 1).

[18] Stambøl, E. M. et al., 'Anticolonial imaginaries in Mali: The longue durée of sovereignty, security, and geopolitics', *Geopolitics*, 27 June 2025; and Sandor and Berlingozzi (note 14).

[19] Dalong, F. and Izu, S. I., 'The rise of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES): A study of post-colonial sovereignism as a driver of regional realignment', *Social Sciences Journal of Policy Review and Development Strategies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (June 2026).

[20] Melville, A., 'Russia exploits western vacuum in Africa's Sahel region', Defense and Security Monitor, 22 Apr. 2024; and Siegle, J., 'Russia's new frontier in Africa', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 8 July 2026.

[21] International Crisis Group, '*Defining a new approach to the Sahel's military-led states*', Commentary, 22 May 2025; and Aliyu, M., 'How armed group alliances are reshaping Mali's conflict and the wider Sahel', Al Jazeera, 22 July 2026.

[22] Wilén, N., '*Stepping up engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states*', Egmont Policy Brief no. 375 (Royal Institute for International Relations: Brussels, 2025).

and governance reforms, and human rights focus that have guided Western interventions in the Sahel.[23]

Despite these new foreign partnerships, the security situation remains volatile as the root causes of instability remain.[24] Major jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group continue to expand and respond to a broad array of local grievances.[25] The 2026 Global Terrorism Index ranks Burkina Faso second, Niger third and Mali fifth.[26] Over 5 million people in the Sahel had been internally displaced or were refugees as of June 2026, while 2.7 million people faced acute food insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali and western Niger.[27] The compounding pressures of extreme climate change, economic fragility and ongoing violence make the Central Sahel one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.[28]

The region's humanitarian crisis, poor development prospects and seeming inability to stem violent extremism coincide with shrinking levels of global aid. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) projects that the level of official development assistance (ODA) will fall by 6.9 per cent in 2026 to its lowest level since 2014.[29] Most of this reduction is a result of cuts by a handful of major donors. While some EU member states have maintained their levels of development aid, this has not offset the broader global decline. The reduction in ODA has exposed the vulnerability and aid dependence of many countries, and the Sahel countries are among the most affected.[30] Bilateral ODA to sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries is expected to fall by around 11 per cent in 2026.[31] Multilateral funding through UN organizations is unlikely to compensate because it is also declining.[32] While most humanitarian and development programmes in the Sahel are still led by European and North American states, they face increased funding uncertainty.[33]

[23] Center for African Security Studies, 'Russia expands its security influence in the Sahel states', 22 July 2026; Wilén (note 22); and Sandnes, M. and Carrozza, I., 'Russia, China and new power dynamics in the Sahel region', *Peace Research Institute Oslo* (PRIO), 16 Jan. 2023.

[24] Ajala (note 7).

[25] Center for Preventive Action, '*Violent extremism in the Sahel*', *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, Updated 5 May 2026; Stambøl et al. (note 18); Wilén, N., 'Silence in the Sahel does not equal stability', *Egmont Policy Brief* no. 374 (Royal Institute for International Relations: Brussels, 2025); Thioune, M., 'Challenges and prospects of geopolitical rivalries in the context of the Sahel conflict', *Timbuktu Institute*, 21 July 2026; and International Crisis Group (note 21).

[26] Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, Mar. 2026.

[27] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), '*Sahel crisis*', UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Updated 30 June 2026; and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), '*Burkina Faso, Mali and western Niger: Humanitarian overview 2026*', 29 June 2026.

[28] United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), '*Sahel 2026 humanitarian needs & requirements overview*', ReliefWeb, 2 June 2026.

[29] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'ODA projections for 2026 and the near-term: Implications for vulnerable countries and sectors', *OECD Policy Brief* no. 59, 19 June 2026.

[30] United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (note 28).

[31] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (note 29).

[32] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (note 29).

[33] de León Cobo (note 10).

III. Localizing to stay engaged

These internal and external geopolitical and aid-related trends have raised important questions about how to stay engaged and whether or how to work with military regimes. They also call into question whether multi-sectoral HDP-nexus partnership approaches can be operationalized in the Central Sahel, given the persistent and growing implementation challenges that have emerged since such approaches became a policy commitment a decade ago.[34]

Germany is the largest bilateral donor in the Sahel. Its support of the SRP and launch of the 'Berlin Process for Food Security in the Sahel' in July 2026 demonstrate that there is the political will to stay engaged in the Sahelian countries despite adverse political conditions, concerns over possible state failure and shrinking resources.[35] For Germany and the EU more broadly, the Sahel is of central importance for security, combating terrorism and reducing the root causes of displacement. Although Western-led security and development assistance has been criticized for being redirected to European security or migration goals, discontinuing assistance to populations caught up in indiscriminate violence and suffering the consequences of conflict, poor economic and social governance, and climate change is not an option. Nor is repeating past mistakes.

There is growing recognition that current political and security challenges in the three Central Sahelian countries are linked, among other factors, to shortcomings in conventional international assistance. Traditional international and regional approaches have tended to understand Sahelian security predominantly through a military or macro-political lens, concerning terrorism, borders, armed groups, national armies and state authority.[36] However, security concerns in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger involve not only armed attacks and terrorism, but also food insecurity, poverty, abuses by the security forces, crime, disputes, access to justice and local political conflicts.[37] In addition to paying insufficient attention to local contexts and treating insecurity as an external technical problem, donors have subordinated the development agenda to the security agenda.[38] In Mali, despite France's initial tactical military successes linked to Operation Serval launched in 2013, subsequent French military interventions (Operation Barkhane launched in 2014) undermined political solutions capable of producing durable peace and instead contributed to grievances.[39]

Similarly, past international humanitarian interventions have been heavily criticized for eroding homegrown initiatives, ignoring local knowledge and denying local and national ownership.[40] Rather than empowering local actors, the international humanitarian system has often subsumed or

[34] Lilly and Scott (note 2).

[35] BMZ, 'Staatssekretär Niels Annen eröffnet "Berlin Process" für Ernährungssicherung im Sahel' [State Secretary Niels Annen launches 'Berlin Process' for food security in the Sahel], Press release, 21 July 2026.

[36] Hagberg (note 5).

[37] Hagberg (note 5).

[38] Sandor, A., Frowd, P. M. and Hönke (note 12), pp. 58–76; Sardan and Zongo (note 5).

[39] Carayol, R., 'Le mirage Sahelien: La France en guerre en Afrique; Serval, Barkhane et après?' [The Sahelian mirage: France at war in Africa, Serval, Barkhane and Beyond], *La Découverte*, 5 Jan. 2023.

[40] Boateng, O. A., 'Building Africa's homegrown humanitarian systems: Restoration as an alternative to localization', *Frontiers in Political Science*, vol. 3 (Sep. 2021); Aloudat, T. and Khan, T., 'Decolonising humanitarianism or humanitarian aid?' PLOS *Global Public Health*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Apr. 2022); and

replaced them, creating dependence on external aid and further weakening state legitimacy.[41]

Transformative change, including transformative peacebuilding, requires a shift in power from international to local actors. This means addressing not only direct forms of power, but also the structural and discursive power that shapes processes and outcomes, including whose knowledge is recognized and whose norms influence decision making.[42] Locals are often better placed to understand the drivers of conflict and identify appropriate responses. This highlights the need to move beyond the conventional donor-recipient relationship and change how international cooperation is structured.[43]

To be able to stay engaged and strengthen the prospects for peace in the Central Sahel, international actors will need to deepen their understanding of local contexts and advance their localization efforts. Localization is a contested term without an agreed definition, but the intention is to promote 'local empowerment and effectiveness' rather than the 'external provision of policies or programmes'.[44] It means ceding greater control and resources to local actors to provide effective humanitarian relief, foster locally rooted development and build sustainable peace through local institutions and agreements.[45] Discussions on localization have focused on issues such as financing, partnerships, capacity strengthening, coordination, recruitment and the transfer of decision-making power to local actors.[46]

A focus on local actors and locally led approaches across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding spheres is not new. However, the past 10–15 years has seen renewed attention on localization, particularly following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the resulting Grand Bargain, where donors and aid organizations made commitments to increase funding to local actors and shift greater decision-making power to them. However, this is easier said than done. In 2025, only 4.3 per cent of humanitarian assistance went directly to local and national actors, up slightly from 3.9 per cent in 2024.[47] When direct allocations and indirect (pass-through) funding are combined, an estimated 8.7 per cent of total reported humanitarian assistance reached local and national actors in 2025, down from 9.5 per cent in 2024.[48] Localized funding levels are still far short of the 25 per cent target set by the Grand Bargain signatories, which include Germany, UNICEF and WFP.

Challenges to localization

In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, localization raises particularly difficult operational, ethical and strategic questions for international HDP actors, partly due to the legitimacy challenges faced by military governments and the ways in which they might use international cooperation to consolidate

Roepstorff, K., 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2 (Aug. 2019), pp. 284–301.

[41] Boateng (note 40).

[42] Richmond, O. P. et al., 'Power or peace? Restoration or emancipation through peace processes', *Peacebuilding*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2021), pp. 243–57.

[43] Paffenholz, T. et al., 'Toward a third local turn: Identifying and addressing obstacles to localization in peacebuilding', *Negotiation Journal,* vol. 39, no. 4 (2023), pp. 349–75.

[44] Aloudat and Khan (note 40).

[45] Aloudat and Khan (note 40); and Boateng (note 40).

[46] Roepstorff (note 40).

[47] Pearson, M. et al., *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2026* (ALNAP/ODI Global: London, 2026).

[48] Pearson et al. (note 47).

their power.[49] There are key tensions concerning who defines and represents the 'local', whose interests are empowered or marginalized, how local priorities relate to national agendas and whether accountability to donors comes at the expense of accountability to affected populations.[50]

Identifying, vetting and investing in local partners has become even more difficult. Restrictions on independent media, political opposition and human rights defenders complicate the efforts of international humanitarian and development actors to identify independent local partners.[51] In 2026, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were among the ten countries with the largest declines in civil liberties and political rights.[52] Even before the most recent coups, local civil society organizations and municipal structures risked being co-opted or heavily restricted by government and military authorities, complicating neutral local ownership.[53]

Localization under military governance, and in conflict contexts more broadly, can also shift physical and legal security risks from international agencies on to local staff and community-based organizations. Globally, the number of security incidents involving attacks on aid workers has risen most sharply in Mali, followed by Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger.[54] In addition, local organizations, particularly those linked to France, risk being viewed with heightened suspicion. NGOs and civil society organizations are regularly suspended for non-compliance with government rules.[55] Thus, international attempts to assist local actors to gain space are constrained by heightened state surveillance, and increased aid regulation and insecurity.

Robust data collection is crucial to enhance aid effectiveness and generate the evidence required for donors to sustain support for locally led peacebuilding. However, insecurity, government restrictions and increasingly coercive information environments make independent data collection and field observation difficult. In Niger, for example, cybercrime legislation criminalizes the production and dissemination of data deemed to 'disturb public order' and makes it illegal to 'harm human dignity through an information system'.[56] In conflict settings, such legal restrictions can suppress independent data production and dissemination, limiting opportunities for triangulation and public verification. This further constrains the ability of both local and international HDP actors to credibly assess and monitor emerging crises and understand whether or how programming contributes to enhancing the prospects for peace. In Burkina Faso and Mali, data collection requires government approval.[57] Even monitoring interventions through

[49] Koné and Zahar (note 1).

[50] Roepstorff (note 40).

[51] Calcagno, S., 'Military coups in the Sahel: A step forward for decolonization and a step backwards for human rights', *Human Rights Research Center*, 18 July 2025.

[52] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy* (Freedom House: Washington, DC, 2026).

[53] Calcagno (note 51).

[54] *Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), 'Total incidents by country, 1997–2025'*, Updated 15 July 2026.

[55] Interview no. 15, SRP, 27 Apr. 2026; Centre for Democracy & Development (CDD) West Africa, '*Security, resource governance and development trajectories: A comparative assessment of post-coup governance in the Sahel*', 29 Mar. 2026.

[56] Sandor and Berlingozzi (note 14).

[57] Interview no. 15, SRP, 27 Apr. 2026; Interview no. 18, SRP, 2 June 2026; and Interview no. 19, SRP, 15 June 2026.

local implementing partners can be difficult.[58] Moreover, reliance on local partners for monitoring risks transferring operational risks without a corresponding transfer of power, thereby reinforcing the very power imbalances that localization seeks to address.

In the light of these challenges, localization in the Central Sahel must be accompanied by particularly careful risk management and investment in understanding local political and social relationships.

IV. How can peace be promoted?

The challenges to localization are compounded by the broader constraints facing peacebuilding efforts in the Sahel, where international actors operate in a complex and increasingly difficult environment. Peace and security efforts involve a range of stakeholders, from state institutions to customary and religious authorities, communities, civil society, regional organizations and international actors. This diverse landscape encompasses different understandings of what peace entails and how it should be pursued, ranging from conflict containment and stabilization to conflict resolution, transformation and locally grounded forms of peacebuilding.

Stabilization and counterinsurgency approaches are primarily oriented towards containing violence and strengthening or restoring state authority. Pursued by the UN, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (between 2017 and 2022) and national governments, aimed at establishing territorial control and counter non-state armed groups that challenge the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, although counterinsurgency places greater emphasis on military means.[59] They are therefore primarily concerned with conflict containment and management rather than conflict resolution or transformation. Stabilization activities have also sought to address drivers of conflict at the local level, including through mediation and community violence reduction. However, these efforts have taken place alongside direct support to central governments and close partnerships with government security forces independently pursuing the military defeat of non-state armed groups.[60] Since the withdrawal of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the dissolution of the G5 Sahel Joint Force following the withdrawal of the Central Sahelian states, national authorities in the Central Sahel have increasingly relied on state-led and militarised security-centred approaches to conflict management.[61]

Meanwhile, the wider institutional and political architecture of peacebuilding has also changed. At the regional level, the emergence of the AES, coupled with the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS, has fragmented West Africa's regional security order, challenging the established role of ECOWAS in conflict management, mediation and regional security

[58] Interview no. 19, SRP, 15 June 2026.

[59] Hunt, C. T. and Curran, D., 'Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding in UN peacekeeping operations: More than just a phase?', *Global Governance*, vol. 26, no.1 (2020), pp. 46–68.

[60] Hunt and Curran (note 59), pp. 46–68.

[61] Spearin, C., 'Russia's Wagner Group/Africa Corps: An authoritarian conflict management examination', *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 24, no. 5 (2024), pp. 479–99; and Thurston, A., 'Military coups, jihadism and insecurity in the Central Sahel', *West African Papers* no. 43, Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) (OECD: Paris, 2024).

governance.[62] At the national level, peace agreements have also experienced significant setbacks. In Mali, for example, the re-emergence of conflict in the north in 2023, coupled with perceptions that agreement was intended to divide Mali's territory, contributed to the definitive collapse of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement in 2024.[63]

Conflict transformation reflects a different understanding of how peace is pursued, placing greater emphasis on the relationships and structural conditions that sustain conflict. It pays particular attention to individual and local agency, identity and the relationships between groups, while recognizing that the structural bases of conflict must also be addressed. Responsibility for peace consequently extends beyond political and military actors to a much wider range of actors across society. Examples from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have transformative ambitions, such as changing relationships, increasing participation and improving resource governance, but there is evidence that their effectiveness is limited and their results uneven.[64]

Supporting peace in a changing peacebuilding landscape

Taken together, this points to a Sahelian peacebuilding landscape in which different understandings and approaches to peace coexist, sometimes complementary but sometimes in competition with one another. Efforts to strengthen the peace component of the HDP nexus need to recognize these different forms of peacebuilding and the connections between them, from national and international processes led by states and international organizations to highly localized practices within conflict-affected communities. Crucially, these should be understood neither as a hierarchy, in which one level of peace is inherently more important than another, nor as independent spheres of action.[65] A national peace agreement, for example, can provide the physical, political and legal conditions in which other types of peace can take root, but such agreements become meaningful in practice only insofar as peace is reflected in how people live their everyday lives. Equally, everyday and locally grounded forms of peace are themselves conditioned by national and international structures, and conflict and peacebuilding dynamics.[66]

Recognizing this interdependence and the importance of local actors and approaches does not mean that the local should be viewed as a single homogeneous entity. Locally led conflict management and resolution structures are not inherently equitable or inclusive. They can amplify pre-existing

[62] Ndiaye, M., 'ECOWAS between great power rivalries and internal fragmentation: Navigating crises and shifting alliances in West Africa', *African Security Review*, Aug. 2026, pp. 1–19; Haider, A., 'The Sahel coup belt as a counter-hegemonic bloc: The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), sovereigntism and the unmaking of the ECOWAS liberal order', *Insight on Africa*, 6 Sep. 2026; and Donko, K. and Doevenspeck, M., 'Violence in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin: Regional integration without ECOWAS', *Society*, vol. 63 (2026), pp. 108–16.

[63] Stambøl (note 18).

[64] See e.g. Apgar, M. et al, 'Evaluating systemic action research as a participatory peace-building intervention in Mali: Findings from Djenné and Mopti', *IDS Working Paper* no. 610 (Institute of Development Studies: Brighton, 2024); Ba, B., Affognon, H. and Flintan, F., 'From conflict to collaboration: How local natural resource management conventions foster peacebuilding between farmers and herders in central Mali', *Disasters*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2026); Donko and Doevenspeck (note 62), pp. 108–16; and Guichaoua, Y., Lorentzen, J. and Mariko, S., *Prospects for Dialogue in the Central Sahel* (Folke Bernadotte Academy: Stockholm, 2025).

[65] Mac Ginty, R., *Everyday Peace: How So-called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict (Oxford University Press: New York, 2021)*.

[66] Mac Ginty (note 65).

inequalities, enable selective enforcement and reinforce entrenched forms of exclusion. Similarly, while hybrid governance can foster pragmatic cooperation between state, customary and religious authorities, such arrangements are highly contingent and can reproduce ethnic, gendered or kinship divides or patterns of elite dominance.[67]

These tensions are particularly visible in conflicts over land and natural resources, which are an important source of localized tensions in the Sahel. Growing pressures on land, water, grazing areas and fishing resources interact with demographic growth, climate variability and insecurity. Although natural resources are rarely the direct cause of conflict, competition over natural resources can aggravate existing socio-economic inequalities, and increase political marginalization and ecosystem degradation, particularly when people's livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources and local institutions lack the capacity to manage competing claims equitably.[68]

It is at this level that the concept of everyday peace offers an additional perspective on how peace is produced. Community members are not simply recipients of peacebuilding interventions or passive subjects of wider conflict dynamics; they can disrupt violent conflict and sustain pro-social relationships through the practices of everyday life. Small acts of peace, such as the actions, behaviours and forms of reasoning through which individuals, families and communities navigate their relationships with others, can create space for coexistence. At its most limited, everyday peace may consist simply of tolerating 'the other' and continuing to occupy the same social space. Even this negative form of peace can provide a first step towards accommodation as conflict subsides or preserve relationships as violence escalates. Cumulatively, small acts can help to prevent escalation and protect lives. By disrupting the narratives and logics of conflict, everyday peace can create space for civility, reciprocity and solidarity, and possibly for reconciliation.

For donor-led international interventions such as the SRP, supporting local efforts to manage, resolve and transform community-level direct and structural violence, while connecting these efforts to the wider peacebuilding architecture, is an important way of operationalizing the peace component of the HDP nexus. This means supporting the conditions by which locally grounded peace can emerge and endure while remaining attentive to local inequalities and to the wider political and structural forces that shape what is possible at the community level.

V. Implications for donors and international HDP actors

A profound political transformation rather than a temporary shift appears to be under way in the Central Sahel. A more plural and contested landscape has emerged in which aid, security, development and sovereignty are understood and pursued differently. International HDP actors can no longer base their assumptions on Western leadership on security and regional coordination, expanding democratic governance or relatively open operating environments. In a context of strong assertions of national and postcolonial sovereignty, Pan-Africanism, multipolar external engagement and prolonged

[67] Donko and Doevenspeck (note 62), pp. 108–16.
[68] Ba, Affognon and Flintan (note 62).

insecurity, international HDP actors need to reflect carefully on past mistakes and critically assess their localization and peacebuilding approaches, including how and at what level they involve local actors and institutions.

When communities face recurring combinations of armed conflict, displacement, food insecurity, climate shocks, weak governance and economic stress, the distinction between humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding becomes blurred. Effective responses continue to require conflict-sensitive emergency assistance linked to livelihood recovery, climate adaptation linked to conflict prevention, basic service delivery linked to social cohesion and resilience programming that can operate despite chronic insecurity. Hence, the main rationale underlying the HDP nexus remains intact. It is the way in which the nexus is understood and operationalized that needs to change.

For donors, this means resisting both disengagement and a return to business as usual. Disengagement would leave communities facing interconnected crises with fewer options for building resilience and reducing conflict. At the same time, continuing engagement cannot mean reproducing the externally driven models of stabilization, development or peacebuilding that have contributed to perceptions of international intervention as intrusive, ineffective or politically instrumental. Staying engaged will therefore require a different political commitment to remain present beyond emergency relief where needs are greatest while accepting that influence may be more limited, results less immediate and approaches more locally determined.

HDP-nexus fatigue will also have to be confronted. After a decade of policy commitments, the nexus risks becoming associated with additional coordination structures, broad strategic frameworks and demands to integrate already overstretched programmes, rather than with meaningful change in how assistance is designed and delivered.[69] The experience of the SRP suggests that the value of the HDP-nexus approach lies in identifying where the objectives and activities of different sectors can reinforce one another to achieve deeper impact. [70] Nexus programming should therefore be treated as a way of making better decisions about priorities, sequencing and complementarity rather than as a top-heavy additional layer of programming architecture.

There are five stand-out implications for international actors seeking to remain engaged in the Sahel.

Stay engaged, but change the terms of engagement

Donors should make a deliberate political commitment to sustained engagement while recognizing the changed conditions under which that engagement takes place. This will mean maintaining support for populations affected by conflict, displacement, food insecurity, climate pressures and poor services while adapting the instruments through which support is provided. It requires being prepared to work through a more diverse set of relationships and at different levels, including with national institutions where appropriate. Moreover, it means investing in relationships with local

[69] Lilly and Scott (note 2).
[70] Bunse, Delgado and Blair (note 3).

and community-based actors and combining greater local decision-making power with attention to representation, accountability, conflict sensitivity and the risks faced by local partners. In an increasingly constrained and politically sensitive environment, donor tolerance for adaptation will be required.

Make localization a transfer of power and resources

While not new, donors and international HDP actors still need to move from localization as a commitment to localization as a change in power relations. This means examining who defines priorities, controls resources, determines programme adaptations, owns knowledge and evidence, and ultimately decides what constitutes success. Greater direct and flexible financing for local actors will need to be accompanied by greater decision-making power. Capacity strengthening should similarly respond to locally identified needs. In the Central Sahel, this must be accompanied by particularly careful risk management and investment in understanding local political and social relationships.

Operationalize the peace component through existing programming

Crucially, to operationalize the peace component of the HDP nexus, international actors should support locally grounded efforts to manage, resolve and transform community-level direct and structural violence. This means supporting the conditions in which local forms of conflict management, coexistence and social cohesion can emerge and endure, rather than treating peace as an assumed by-product of humanitarian and development programming. This approach should start with conflict dynamics and by recognizing that local peacebuilding takes place within broader political, economic and structural conditions that shape what is possible at the community level. It must therefore remain attentive to local inequalities and power relations, and the ways in which interventions can reinforce or challenge existing grievances and patterns of exclusion.

Enhanced food security, livelihoods, natural resource management, basic services and climate resilience can all contribute to peace where they address grievances, reduce competition, strengthen cooperation or create opportunities for dialogue. While conflict sensitivity is a minimum requirement, programmes should go further where there are credible opportunities to strengthen relationships, support local capacities to manage and resolve conflict, and contribute to transforming the underlying conditions that sustain violence. This also requires recognition of the limits of community-level interventions. Locally grounded efforts are important, but their potential to generate and sustain peace depends partly on how they engage with wider national and regional processes and with the structural forces that influence local conflict dynamics.

Programmes should therefore systematically ask: How might this intervention affect relationships between groups? Could it reduce or intensify competition over resources? Whose interests and voices does it strengthen and whose might it marginalize? Does it create opportunities for cooperation and dialogue? Could it contribute to managing, resolving or transforming a local conflict, including its underlying structural drivers? How might locally

grounded efforts be connected to relevant national and regional peacebuilding processes?

These questions will help to translate the peace component of the HDP nexus into a practical programming lens that connects humanitarian and development interventions with locally led peacebuilding, while linking community-level efforts to the wider peacebuilding architecture and the political and structural changes needed for peace to endure.

Measure what matters while accepting that peace is difficult to attribute

Donors need to adapt their expectations around evidence, results and attribution, and invest in forms of monitoring that can capture changes in relationships, perceptions, participation, cooperation and conflict dynamics alongside conventional output indicators. Qualitative and locally generated knowledge should have a greater role. Monitoring should also be used to support adaptation. For peacebuilding, the key question is whether an intervention strengthens conditions that make peaceful interaction more possible and violent escalation less likely. This is both more realistic in a highly volatile environment and more consistent with a locally grounded understanding of peace.

Move from nexus fatigue to nexus pragmatism

Overcoming HDP-nexus fatigue will require a focus on the practical value of integration and how HDP efforts can reinforce one another to address the interconnected challenges people face. The peace component should guide everyday programming decisions, including where actors work and with whom, what they fund, how resources are distributed, whose knowledge informs decisions and how interventions affect relationships between groups.

Initiatives such as the SRP offer a platform for aligning sectoral interventions around shared resilience and social cohesion objectives. Donors should enable such partnerships to remain flexible, locally anchored and sufficiently long term to support social change. International HDP actors should use them to strengthen complementarity across interventions and sustain space for locally grounded humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding.

To conclude, in a politically fragmented Sahel, international actors can continue to support livelihoods, essential services, conflict management and relationships across lines of division. Sustained engagement, empowered local actors, peace-sensitive programming and context-responsive evidence can help donors use limited resources more strategically to strengthen resilience, social cohesion and peace. Overcoming nexus fatigue ultimately means making integration meaningful in the everyday practice of humanitarian and development cooperation.

Abbreviations

AES	Alliance of Sahel States
BMZ	German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
BRS	Building Resilience in the Sahel Programme (UNICEF)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HDP	Humanitarian–Development–Peace
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SARES	Sahel Resilience Strengthening project (GIZ)
SIRP	Sahel Integrated Resilience Programme (WFP)
SRP	Sahel Resilience Partnership

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HDP NEXUS PROGRAMMING IN THE SAHEL: PARTNERING FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL AND AID LANDSCAPE

SIMONE BUNSE AND CAROLINE DELGADO

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