TRANSCRIPT

Event

“Finding a Path Through Quagmire: Humanitarian Access and Coordination in the Sahel”

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FEATURING

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Jacob Kurtzer: Good morning to our colleagues in Washington. Good afternoon to our colleagues in Bamako, elsewhere in the Sahel, and here in East Africa. My name is Jacob Kurtzer, with the Humanitarian Agenda at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Thank you all for joining us today for this discussion about the humanitarian challenges in the Sahel, and, in particular, for the discussion about the ways in which attempts at implementing and operationalizing the triple nexus have met challenges given the Sahel’s uniquely difficult and securitized and challenging operational environment.

I’m very grateful today to be partnering with our colleagues in the Africa Program. I want to give thanks to our colleagues Catherine Nzuki and Maela from the Africa Program, as well as the team at the Humanitarian Agenda – Jude Larnerd, Sierra Ballard, and Fiona Joseph. I also want to acknowledge the support of USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance in helping us put on conversations like this today.

Today’s conversation is partly a launch of a report by Will Brown on the humanitarian challenges in the Sahel. But it’s also an opportunity to hear from humanitarian analysts and humanitarian partners about the challenges they face. The triple nexus, in many ways, seems extremely intuitive, linking humanitarian development and peacebuilding activities. It sounds intuitive, and in fact it reflects different ways of thinking and working in the humanitarian sector over the course of time. But we also know that given the unique challenges humanitarian organizations face, particularly in areas with nonstate armed groups that don’t necessarily abide by or understand concepts like the humanitarian principles and the protection of the civilian population, that trying to operationalize a way of working that connects more substantively humanitarian and development and case practitioners can often create real meaningful challenges for humanitarian action.

So once again, I’m very grateful for you all for joining us, and in particular for our panelists, and for Will, and for Mvemba, for being here to have this conversation. I want to turn it over to director and senior fellow at the Africa Program, Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, to introduce our speakers and our conversation and lead our panel. Thank you very much, and over to you, Mvemba.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you very much, Jake. Greetings, everyone, and welcome to this session. I’m Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, senior fellow and director of the Africa Program here at CSIS. It’s my pleasure to welcome you, but particularly to welcome our distinguished panel today, whom I will introduce. Also, will be speaking in the order, actually, that I introduce them.

First of all, I’d like to welcome Will Brown. Will Brown is a multi-award-winning Africa correspondent based in Nairobi for The Telegraph. Before
joining The Telegraph, he was the West Africa correspondent for The Economist, based in Dakar, and a freelance journalist in India, where he worked on investigations into sex trafficking in Kolkata and New Delhi. Welcome, Will.

Then we're also joined from Maine by Bill O'Keefe, who is the executive vice president for mission, mobilization, and advocacy at Catholic Relief Services. Bill oversees efforts to ensure that U.S. foreign policy reduces poverty and promotes justice in developing countries, where Catholic Relief Services works. He and his staff advocate to Congress and the administration on a range of issues, including migration, refugees, food security, and all aspects of the U.S. foreign aid. Bill also works to involve American Catholics in public campaigns for policy change. Thank you for joining us, Bill. Welcome.

And then Ms. Ornella Morderan, who is head of Sahel Program for the Institute for Security Studies, which we're all very familiar with. Ornella leads the ISS Sahel Program, covering Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, from their offices in Bamako, where she joins us from today. She has over 10 years of experience working on peacebuilding, security, sector governance, and democratic processes in West Africa and beyond, and humanitarian assistance in an ongoing crisis context.

So welcome to the panel. We will start with Will making some remarks, and then we'll engage in a discussion with the panelists, after which we'll open to take questions from the audience. Without further ado, Will, please. The floor is yours.

Will Brown: Thank you, Mvemba. And, well, welcome, everyone. And first of all, I want to say a huge thank you to all my fine colleagues at CSIS that have helped with the report and organized our event. And also, a big thank you to everyone who’s attending. I hope we can have an interesting and informative discussion.

So as we all know, the conflict in the Sahel is staggering into its tenth year. Jihadists, militiamen, criminal gangs terrorizing vast tracks of land, while government soldiers often end up brutalizing the very civilians they are meant to protect. The Sahelian states are retreating ever close towards their capitals, leaving millions of people at the whim of men with guns. This, in effect, is hollowing out the heart of West Africa as climate change begins to bite home.

Every year the humanitarian needs are rising. According to the latest figures, about 50 million people – one quarter of the combined population of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. This is likely to get far worse as the economic effects of the invasion of
Ukraine hit home. But international focus is generally elsewhere. We need to be talking about this here, and we need to be talking about this now.

For millions, humanitarian organizations are the only means of survival. But the road for aid-givers is perilous. Humanitarians must navigate an ever-more fractured and dangerous political sphere, with limited funding. So for this report, “Finding a Path Through the Quagmire,” we interviewed dozens of humanitarian and development officials, and civil society members across the region. I really wanted to let them speak anonymously so they would feel more comfortable voicing their frustrations, and often did not mention the specific zones where they were working in the report, as you could clearly identify them or their organizations.

But we can generally – while you can go into more detail in the report – we can generally break down many of these problems into four paths. Firstly, there is an increased use of IEDs and kidnapping cases over the last few years. This has had a dramatically impact on humanitarian nexus. This is bad in Mali, but awful in Burkina Faso. One senior U.N. staffer compared the situation in Burkina Faso to the Angolan civil war, where nonstate armed groups managed to landlock people – effectively landlock people and cities.

This, of course, has a serious knock-on effect. Western expatriates tend to manage humanitarian or development projects in the field. However, the increased rise of kidnapping means that they often are not allowed to monitor the project themselves. So during our research, senior aid workers told us that this effects quality control, it undermines investments and outcomes, and means that major international agencies often, and sometimes, lack the capacity to independently verify their impact on the ground or monitor events that could affect their operations. Instead, many rely – well, some told us that they rely heavily on local partners who, of course, often have their own complex identities and relationships to the conflict which need to be balanced.

And so the second main problem is the obvious security fragmentation. The fragmented international military response to the Sahelian crisis has been a headache of the humanitarians to navigate for years. But the recent influx of Russian mercenaries and the departure of the French from Mali has made working in the Sahel, particularly Mali, even more complex. Aid workers – during our research, aid workers told us repeatedly that many of their carefully managed relationships have been thrown into flux in the last few months.

Thirdly, we have government interference since late 2020, when six French aid workers and their Nigerian guide were tragically killed just outside Niamey. Sahelian governments have been understandably reluctant to let aid workers go into moderate or high-risk areas without military escorts.
However, these military escorts often pose a major problem. Many people we spoke to said that they—many humanitarians we spoke to—said that there was no coherent policy on military convoys, and that often taking these convoys would undermine their mandate and blur the lines between humanitarians and combatants, putting everyone from the humanitarians to the recipients of aid at increased risk.

And lastly, an issue which came up time and time again in our research, was the implementation of the so-called triple nexus approach, which, put simply, seeks to address—it seeks to push humanitarian development and peacekeeping needs into one bucket and address them simultaneously. Now, this theoretical framework has been quite popular in donor countries. And it kind of makes sense when you think about it, as Jacob was referring to. But from our research, like all theoretical frameworks, the reality on the ground is often far more complex. And there does seem to be a systematic confusion of how the nexus should be implemented across the field. And we found that there was a striking disconnect between senior administrative staff and donors in hubs like D.C. or Geneva and those implementing projects on the ground.

So, yes. I think that’s enough from me for now. Maybe I’ll go back to you, Mvemba.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, Will. While you are still there, I would like to actually—can you frame a little bit the concept itself, of triple nexus? What is it, exactly—you had referred to it in your remarks—for some of our audience at large?

Mr. Brown: So, effectively, in many humanitarian crises you’ve had humanitarian, development, and peacekeeping actors acting separately and fulfilling their own functions. Now, the idea of the triple nexus is to bring their responses together, and so they act as one on a situation. That’s effectively what it means in theory. What it means in practice is something different.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, Will. So, in practice, how does this translate? And what was the biggest humanitarian challenges and the challenge to the response that, one, the population are expecting, but also donors are anticipating?

Mr. Brown: So, in practice, if we take the example of Mali and the U.N. peacekeeping mission there, MINUSMA, in practice aid workers told us it ends up being a highly confused scenario when people do not know how they are supposed to function. And, for example, MINUSMA implement—or, Operation Barkhane, are implementing these kind of so-called quick implementation projects. Where basically they hand out maybe humanitarian—they allegedly
hand out humanitarian aid and ask for any kind of information on non-state armed groups.

This, humanitarians told us, blurs the line between the combatants in the conflict and the humanitarians, and puts the humanitarians at greater and increased risk. And so, to answer the second part of your question, which was the biggest humanitarian challenges, I think – and maybe some of the other panelists would like to come in on this one with their own views afterwards – but I think the main challenge is the complete unpredictability of the situation. There are no clear battle lines in the Sahel, or very few of them. Many of the fighting, kidnapping, bombing seems to happen almost completely at random. And there is almost a mesh of very complicated competing commercial, ethnic, and political interests in many areas where the people you need to get aid to are.

And these interests often go right across combatant lines. So you’re basically – you have some people you happen to negotiate who are playing two sides or even three sides of the conflict, exploiting NGOs and humanitarians’ cash as the conflict becomes ever more entrenched. I think generally the biggest zones, from my research and reporting, the most difficult zones to get to people are in northern and eastern Burkina Faso and central Mali. And that, again, mainly is become of the kidnapping threat and the IED risk. But also, I think it’s just – as a general rule – I think it’s quite difficult for people to get access to areas where the Sahel’s Islamic State affiliate has a dominant role. Because this movement has a very strong criminal element to it, and they’re much more difficult to negotiate with. Yeah.

Mr. Dizolele: Very good. Thank you. Thank you, Will. Will, when we talk about those dynamics, can you describe some of those dynamics between donors and partners? But then also, how the donors responsive – how donors are responsive to partners’ challenges or pushing different agendas. Because I presume, the way you’re describing it, there’s the security – there’s the urgent need, there is the aid that is supposed to come, the humanitarian support, but then there is, I think what you’re describing, an apparent friction between all these parts.

Mr. Brown: Yeah, so I think it’s a really interesting question. And I think I can only answer part of it, because from my research we’ve been interviewing many people who are working on the front line or in regional positions, people who are in the Sahel, at the coalface, trying to do something. And I haven’t spoken as much to donors in the kind of more donor hubs.

But I think generally my sense is – from speaking to people – is that they’re generally quite down on the relationship between partners and donors. They think that the triple nexus approach, the triple nexus agenda, is being pushed on them quite hard. And I spoke to several – a few smaller organizations –
who were quite worried. And they felt they were being forced to go along with the triple nexus concept, or risk being abandoned by once-supportive donors. I think others I spoke to went even further, and they were saying they thought that donors and actors on the ground were speaking an altogether different language to each other.

Mr. Dizolele: OK. Thank you.

I will turn to Ornella with the same question that we asked Bill – we asked Will – excuse me – and see what your perspective is like. So, Ornella, what’s from where you stand, from your research, from your analysis, what are the biggest challenges for humanitarian side, and also the challenges to the response?

Ornella Morderan: So, you know, I was introduced as a researcher, which I am. And leading the ISS program in the region. But before turning to research, I was actually leading the Mali country program for one of the major humanitarian organizations here, which, of course, provides me with a particular sympathy for the concerns of humanitarian actors in the region. I think one of the main challenges, as you mentioned, and as Will mentioned in his report, is the fragmented nature of the security environment, which is really clear from, you know, just a diversity and multiplicity and the high level of divergence between the various armed actors in the region.

What this effectively means when it comes to negotiating humanitarian access is that, you know, it’s just extremely difficult to strike any kind of deal or agreement with armed groups that would stand for an extended stretch of land. Essentially, every other few kilometers you will have to take the process all over again, and then you are likely to have to take it over and over in the long term again. So the whole access dimension I think is something that’s extremely critical. Some points were already made about the government-imposed restrictions, which makes sense, but which also could put humanitarians in a bit of a principled dilemma, I would say.

So that’s one thing. The other element, I think – and taking this to the aspect of your question about the relationship with donors – is, indeed, the triple nexus is a great idea in theory. It’s extremely hard to implement in a context where the three parts of this triple nexus – humanitarian development and security/peace – are actually driven by different actors that come from different backgrounds with a different understanding of what service means in a conflict environment. It has proven much easier in the Sahel, and especially here in Mali where I’m based, to build a kind of sense of common purpose between humanitarian and development actors, which have some, you know, common worldviews to start with, as opposed to with security actors.
It’s quite likely that this will become even more difficult as we go on, considering the fact that at the moment the regional security architecture as a whole is being questioned, and is less and less likely to be a robust partner even if a common understanding was reached – which, again, isn’t the case at this point.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you. Thank you, Ornella.

Bill, you come from the other perspective. You sit kind of at the intersection between donors and implementers, I guess. I mean, being that CRS being such a mammoth. What is your take on this? What do you see being those big challenges, but also that partnership between donors and implementers?

Bill O'Keefe: Great question. Yeah, thanks. Thanks for the question. And I, in late June, spent a week with religious leaders in our program in Burkina Faso, and got the opportunity to really hear about how this situation is going, and came back extremely concerned, which is why I’m so glad to be a part of this. And also so appreciative of Will’s report. I think there’s inadequate attention to the Sahel generally by donors and policymakers. And I’m really – we’re hopeful that this report is going to highlight the unbelievable humanitarian need and the challenges.

In response to your question, so a couple things. One, there’s a multiplicity of donors, and the donors have different understandings of the nexus, and also have different funding mechanisms that make it more difficult for implementers to make the kind of linkages, even between humanitarian and development programming, and then with more social cohesion and peacemaking programs. So that’s point one. There’s a lot of donors, and an incoherence of approach.

This is a really great opportunity for all of us in the humanitarian community to think about localization and to really push efforts to support local organizations, local civil society, local religious organizations, that have the kind of relationships on the ground to navigate these difficult political situations. And I think donors are at different places in how they are set up to support local organizations and support international groups, groups like CRS, other nonprofits that are trying to strengthen over time those local organizations to play their role. I think that’s really important.

And then finally, just an understanding of the nexus, which I think Will really laid out nicely and Ornella mentioned too, is very challenging. We, starting from Rwanda in 1994, kind of came up with our own nexus approach that looks at relief, development, and then social cohesion. And I think that that understanding has been over-securitized and over-militarized in this response over time. And I’d just point to Afghanistan and Iraq, where I think some of the same sins were committed, where military actors under the
guise of building peace implemented quick-impact projects that really undermined the ability of humanitarians to do our role, and also, frankly, didn’t help in creating security and stability, and confused the population about the role of those militaries.

And I think we look at it as humanitarians in that those kind of activities confuse the population about our role. But I think an equally severe problem is it confuses the understanding of who are these people and what are they really here to do, wearing these military uniforms and carrying these guns. Last point, one of the things I took away was listening to colleagues on the ground say, from the perspective of a villager in northern Burkina Faso or eastern Burkina Faso, whether somebody with a gun driving through their village at 50 miles an hour in a Jeep is from the government, is from the U.S., is from the French, or in Mali is from the Russians, is completely meaningless. They have no idea why those people are there. All they know is they’re not helping them. And that’s the problem that the security people need to grapple with. So thanks so much. Really glad to be here.

You’re on mute, Mvemba.

Mr. Dizolele: Yeah. Thank you, Bill.

So, following up on that, does the population, you know, triple nexus, all these concepts. Those of us in Washington, you know, London, Nairobi, and so on, it’s great. We talk about these things all the time. Is this a concept that even trickles down to the population? Just to follow on the point that – follow up on the point you just said. For the locals, everybody looks the same, whether they’re driving a Toyota or anything else in that uniform. And I wonder if this combination of seeing humanitarians being accompanied by armed people, that also adds to the complexity of this, how the population will perceive that, beyond just not maybe being in on this entire concept.

Mr. O’Keefe: So I think that you’re absolutely right. It will confuse the population. And I think if the same actors are performing these functions, it will be extremely problematic. But I also think that defining the nexus, not just the peace part of it, not just as peacemaking or as kind of security but more from the side of social cohesion and peacemaking at the community level, that’s a missing dimension. And I think that on the ground, local communities intuitively and explicitly understand that, particularly in a place like Burkina Faso, where people lived together in relative harmony for many years, that humanitarian and development and social cohesion – that they do go hand in hand. You can’t help women have water – have a safe water supply if your neighboring community is at war with you.

And so these things, I think, are, at that level, quite understood. It’s when kind of foreign actors get involved and when military forces get involved that
it becomes problematic. And we need security. So I'm not going to be one who says, you know, ideistically, you know, let's throw all the military people out. But there needs to be a clear mandate. It needs to be clearly expressed to the local population, understood, and then much greater investment in these kind of long-term root-cause issues that we can talk about later.

**Mr. Dizolele:** Thank you. Thank you, Bill.

Going back to Will, how did you experience that on the ground? Just, you know, how did the population conceive of – if they even do – of this triple nexus. Is it explained? And then, what ramification that has in the way that they see then this juncture of humanitarian peacebuilders and development people?

**Mr. Brown:** Yeah. So I think, to go back to what Bill was hinting at there, is that it really doesn't matter. If you've got a uniform, if you've got a gun, I don't think – it doesn't really matter, I think local people, normal people, will not distinguish between you so much. And so I think I guess I think that there is a – when I was on the ground, there was a great deal of confusion about who was doing what. I think that was one of the key takeaways.

And I think that – sorry, I lost my track of thought. But I think that this kind of – I think basically what you've got here is you've got these multiple interpretations of what the nexus actually is, which aren't even – people haven't really even kind of begun to work those out, as Bill mentioned, with these different kind of organizations, all having their different kind of interpretations what – and different funders – all having different interpretations what the triple nexus is.

Now, as is gradually trickles down, you have – this kind of confusion always multiplies as it goes through different actors. And by the time I think you get to local people on the ground, it's kind of – it's lost in the haze of this. I hope that makes sense. It's a complicated question. (Laughs.)

**Mr. Dizolele:** It does. (Laughs.) Ornella, you also have a standpoint from where you are. What does that look like, this same line of reasoning, or lack thereof, or connection between the population and the people trying to implement the triple nexus?

**Ms. Morderan:** Absolutely. I mean, from my standpoint, which I seem to be the only one actually based in the Sahel on this call, so I would tend to agree with – at the remark that's been made on, you know, just the general confusion that uniforms bring. I think that's quite clear. And that bearing arms and weapons bring. That's very clear. Now, the other element, I think, is that, as Bill was
mentioning, the security dimension of this triple nexus is the part that has always been challenging.

I mentioned earlier, you know, the diverging worldviews and efforts that makes it very difficult to just solicit a common starting point, a common base of understanding, that is essential to any meaningful cooperation between development, humanitarian workers on the one hand, and security actors on the other hand and security actors on the other hand. There has been attempts to make this work, especially through the stabilization concepts. But here again, this is a concept that no one has really been able to define. So each actor gets to put more or less what they want into the broader stabilization concept. So it doesn’t really help clarify things.

In practice, what we’ve seen developed, I think, is a version of the type of nexus that replaces the security component with a peacebuilding component. So that loops back to what Bill was saying, maybe this could be the way. I think this is what we’re seeing a lot of already, because that peacebuilding component feels more value-compatible to humanitarian and development actors.

So we have this kind of programming and strategy-building around emergency, humanitarian support, longer-term development work, and a peacebuilding social cohesion dimension that’s become very common across the region. One of the advantages for humanitarian and development actors of these kind of approach is also that they don’t actually need much of state involvement to make it happen, as opposed to building with, like, militarily driven or institutionally backed security approach.

So these things have been tried. They have shown some level of success, but also have shown quite some level of limitations. I think another important element to keep in mind – and maybe this is something I would push back on a bit, regarding the quick impact projects. So, depending on who implements them, whether it’s Operation Barkhane or whether it’s MINUSMA and so on, these quick-impact projects have different meanings. In the context of a counter-terrorism operation they are purely meant to improve – I mean, as a bit of a PR tool, really, to make sure that communities are more receptive to the message of a particular warring actor.

I am not totally convinced of how confusing this is to communities, in the sense that this is not – those kind of quick-impact projects – are not delivered by civilian actors, in civilian dresses, with NGO locals on their back. They’re delivered by soldiers who present themselves as soldiers. They just happen to be – to be coming with, you know, rice, or water supplies, or whatever.
So I think it’s important to – you know, one, we acknowledge that escorts are a problem because they impose this kind of dual identification. I come with a soldier, meaning I might be on their side. That is a problem. I’m not sure so sure that for military actors just doing something as a military actor is necessarily that confusing. It can be a problem from a humanitarian actors’ perspective for different reasons. But that line of thought, which we hear in the region a lot, perhaps requires a bit more of nuancing.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Ornella.

One thing I wanted to – just to follow up on that. Be that as it may, have there been any attempts to educate the population – I understand this is a volatile region, so people don’t always have time and means to educate the population. But be that, the population are the recipient. They’re supposed to be the recipient of whatever the world is doing with this triple nexus. In the end, it’s about supporting the local population. Have there been any attempt to educate them on this complex issue of triple nexus, and why these various actors feel the need to work together?

Ms. Morderan: So I think, you know, just as in the Global North, you wouldn’t have typically – OK, what example can I enter? In France, for instance, there is this extremely complex state social welfare system, which people know is in their interest and how to benefit. But they don’t really know what – I mean, what the mechanisms are in how it works. I think we should approach this with a kind of similar approach. It might be a bit excessive to expect regular, ordinary citizens who are not specialized in public policy or in international cooperation, et cetera, to grapple with concepts that we, as specialists, haven’t really figured out yet. What matters to people, I think, is that we make it work. Not that they are able to explain it, but that we make it work. So that, I think, is on actors’ side. It’s not and it shouldn’t be on the beneficiaries.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, Ornella.

Bill, you wanted to jump in and add?

Mr. O’Keefe: Yeah. I just think first, Ornella, thanks. I think deeply appreciative of your perspective, and particularly bringing it from the region directly. So thank you. The only thing on quick-impact projects, from our experience, I wanted to add – and, again, this builds on experience in Afghanistan and Iraq and also in the region – is military actors generally aren’t particularly good at doing these kinds of activities. Even basic humanitarian activities. And they tend to not have the kinds of long-term relationships with credible community leaders that increase the chances that those activities will succeed.
And so what we saw in Afghanistan and Iraq was a lot of money going to quick-impact projects that supported the kinds of people who actually you wouldn’t want to support in a community, who sort of raised their hand first but weren’t the credible leaders. And then it changed the community dynamics as that money flowed into those communities and was problematic. And, you know, I wouldn’t give me a gun and expect me to defend anybody. I’m not suitable for the military. But and I don’t think our humanitarian staff would be any better than I am. And I don’t think the military is any better – any military – is any better at humanitarian work. And I just think there are some dangerous impacts of that, as it plays out.

The impulse, I think, to build hearts and minds, to have a positive relationship with the community – and even at a human level. I’ve talked to soldiers who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. And, again, I don’t want to go down too far that path, but just – and I’m sure it’s the same in all these militaries. You have good people who are trying to help, and they want to help. And then they also see that it benefits them, it helps them get information. But we’ve seen that strategy really have more downsides than upsides. But I do want to recognize the complexity.

How we define peace and who gets to define peace also is something, I think, worth considering. USAID has a peace through evaluation learning and adapting activity that looked at community definitions of peace and helping – and working with communities to actually define what they wanted, and what they meant. And I think that’s an interesting way of viewing it also, from kind of the bottom up. Thanks so much.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Bill.

So on that point, are there misconceptions in the West about the Sahel and the operational environment that should be reconsidered? What are we getting wrong? Is a security-first approach appropriate in this context? You know, it’s a challenging context. This question, I will start with Ornella, who’s on the ground there. And then Will, if you want to comment as well, that’s what we’ll have.

Ms. Morderan: So maybe I will take the last part of the question and let my co-panelists come in on the two other aspects: Is a security-first approach working?

Frankly, this crisis has been going on for the past 10 years. And despite much of the policy-level talk that’s been happening about the need for, you know, integrated, multidimensional, holistic approaches, and so on, what we have seen unfold on the ground actually – and this is also very clear when you have a look at the distribution of donor funding across the – (audio break) – in fact is a heavily security- and military-driven response which has not delivered anywhere close to the expected results.
So the crisis keeps worsening year on year. Violence against civilians is skyrocketing every year, since at least 2019. And the humanitarian situation in terms of forced displacement, in Burkina Faso in particular, has become absolutely horrendous. So it’s quite clear by now that the security-first approach, or mainly security-driven approach, is not working. And so there is a need to rethink that strategic framework.

And many of the embassies around the region, in fact, are grappling with – (audio break) – and strategies to balance their programmatic and funding portfolio, and also to reengage with national authorities in terms of a conversation of what a durable resolution of the conflict itself might look like, and what kind of political avenues can be pursued. So these are elements that are on the table, and that must remain. Because the key element that’s been missing, I believe, is the human-centeredness of strategies.

Oh, I hear that I am breaking up a bit. Yes, this is a bad time. (Laughs.) This is a bad time for connection in Bamako. Early afternoon is always problematic. So I will stop here.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Ornella. Thank you for that perspective.

Will, please.

Mr. Brown: Yeah. I just want to say thank you, Ornella. There’s some really, really fantastic points there. I would come out completely and fully agree with almost everything Ornella said. I think it’s pretty clear by now, after a decade of fighting, that the security-based approach is not working.

I just want to speak a little bit – you asked about kind of Western perspectives, and everything like that. And as I’m currently – normally, I live in Nairobi, but currently I’m in London right now. I’ve been kind of meeting all the contacts and talking to some people here. And I just really wanted to say sort of maybe a bit about the perspective from the Anglosphere a bit, U.K., America. And I feel that there is really – it’s really defined by sort of short-termism, in a way.

So, for example, Britain made a much-lauded so-called pivot to the Sahel. It kind of wanted to engage in the Sahel, sent these, kind of, 250 troops onto the MINUSMA mission I think three days ago now. And this was kind of sold as kind of this was going to solve everything, you know? That’s kind of how the British media and commentators reacted. But obviously, it was a – it’s not a drop in the ocean. And at the same time, they were saying they were going to start pumping money into the Sahel and pivot towards it. But it doesn’t work.
And then when they – I think when people, maybe in Whitehall or in government, realize just how unbelievably complicated the Sahel conflict was, and that there was no sort of silver bullet, they kind of backed out a little bit. And, you know, there was no kind of long-term commitment there. But I’m going off a little bit into the Anglophone angle. But I think – but, yeah, just to echo Ornella’s points. I mean, it is clear that whatever we’re doing right now is not working.

It’s not just an overly security-based approach. It’s an incredibly fractured, overly based security approach. And, yeah, just something needs to get – something needs to change, because this isn’t – this isn’t how it’s going to get solved. Thank you.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you. Thank you, Will.

One more question I have here for our panel. I go to Bill. Will, Bill, we go to Bill. (Laughter.) The question is: Humanitarian actors have reported being asked to do things beyond their scope of expertise and mandate. What challenges does this pose? I’m just asking because you’re CRS. So I imagine you’re doing a lot of implementing there, or at least working with your partners.

Mr. O’Keefe: Yeah. Thank you. First, just I want to give a huge amen to Ornella and Will, their last comments. I think, Ornella, you absolutely summed up – (laughs) – perfectly the – our core recommendation, which is we need a much more human-centered approach that looks at addressing the actual long-term drivers of the conflict over time and rebuilding the relationship between people and the state. And more military and more investment is not the way to do that. So thank you. Just so well-said. And, Will, you addition also so appreciated.

And so in terms of our experience of being asked to do things that are not in our mandate, that has not been so much of a problem for us, per se. And I think that may be different than others in the sense that we have a really strong set of faith-based and other local partners who have been and are present on the ground for decades, and have strong local relationships, and are navigating these difficult things with great difficulty. But we haven’t been asked to support and engage in the kinds of activities that would violate our mandate, or we’d be concerned with.

I do think that we have concerns about any normalization of military convoys as a delivery mechanism, and are calling on the U.N. to really make sure and negotiate with security actors that that does not become the norm, and that they themselves do not use military convoys, because in our
experience around the world that actually just makes it more risky in the long run, not more secure.

So I’m not sure I’m the best one. Maybe, Ornella, in your previous role, you might have a perspective from other organizations about how they were being tugged in different directions than what they would – than their mandates.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Bill.

Ornella, did you want to respond? Or if not, we’ll open – we’ll take to the line from the audience.

Ms. Morderan: Actually, I think Bill covered it quite well. (laughs.)

Mr. Dizolele: All right. OK. Thank you. So let’s – thank you, again, panelists. Now we’re going to move to the next step, the next stage of our discussion, and we’ll take questions from the audience. One question is a bit of a departure from what we’ve been saying, but it’s connected. Persons ask: Why not forge international partnerships with Sahel-based industrial SMEs, lay the basis for more than labor-intensive industrialization of the Sahel, and avoid parts of this humanitarian need? Any response?

Mr. O’Keefe: Well, just quickly – and, Will, you’re on mute. But just super quickly, I’m – the specifics I can’t really comment on, in terms of industrial-based SMEs. But what I can say is what I think the participant is saying is, can we organize capital and private sector partnerships around development that will help create the kind of economic environment to pull youth out of kind of disenfranchisement, give people a future. And in theory, that’s a great idea, and one, I think, that donors should be looking into. But so I would just answer it at that level.

And then I’m sorry, I cut you off, Will. But that was easy to do because you were muted.

Mr. Brown: (laughs.) Don’t worry. I wasn’t saying anything. No, I was just saying it’s maybe not the question that, I don’t know if, Ornella, you’d feel comfortable answering or not. I don’t feel particularly comfortable answering that.

But just to echo maybe a bit what Bill said, that – I mean, fundamentally, it’s quite – many speak in very, very broad terms, I think many of the companies operating in the Sahel, speaking very broadly, are quite parasitical in nature. It’s an extractive thing. And much of the money, and much of the capital, ends up in Western capitals or somewhere like Dubai, or something. So I think also needs to be addressed. You know, money and people are seeping out all the time. And that creates this kind of vicious cycle. Thank you.
Mr. Dizolele: Thank you. Ornella, are you going to join, or should we take the next question?

Ms. Morderan: Yeah. So perhaps just a couple additional points on this. So many of the foreign ministries that are leading corporation in the Sahel have actually adopted somewhat of a similar view. And that's quite visible when you look at the way they have named or renamed – rebranded their corporations – (audio break). So it's often something like International Corporation. And – (audio break) – this and that. So the notion that the private sector should have a role to play in longer-term development is something that's quite well-accepted.

Now, looking more closely at what the economic fabric looks like in the Sahel, this is easier said than done. And this could take an awful long, long time, in fact. These are countries that usually have something around 80 percent of rural and agricultural activity as part of their job sharing. These are countries where the violence impact is not actually driven by just poverty, but by inequality and injustice. So there is a governance element in it that private sector cannot fix. So there is a number of reasons why, you know, although pursuing a more decisive industrialization path is interesting, it's definitely not a realistic short-term plan. So we still need to figure out what do in the short term. And this is where ideas like the triple nexus come in.

Mr. Dizolele: OK. Thank you very much.

I will take one. The next question is: The aspect of the triple nexus approach that has not yet been discussed is state-sponsored humanitarian activities in the Sahel. How efficient or not efficient have humanitarian government agencies been in navigating the current security environment? And how closely are they working with NGOs on the ground? Any one of you who feels comfortable to make this response is welcome to do so.

Mr. O'Keefe: I don't really have any useful information about the specifics of that coordination to make a judgement. I will say that, you know, these are not monolithic governments. And I think sometimes in the U.S. policymakers forget that. And so there are very competent and successful and good partnering parts of governments that we and others work very well, closely together in support of our work. But that’s a little different than the question. So I'll just have to leave it at that.

Mr. Dizolele: Ornella, from the ground, how does that look?

Ms. Morderan: Hello?
Mr. Dizolele: Yes, we can hear you.

Ms. Morderan: OK. So my line is cutting. I hope it works. So, from my experience, what I can say is that in all three countries in the central Sahel – Mali, Niger, and Burkina – state agencies that get actively involved in humanitarian work typically take more of a coordination kind of role. So a lot of the relationship with NGOs consists in, you know, requesting NGOs to submit their work plans, and to submit reports, and keeping an eye, essentially, on what they are doing.

The actual provision of humanitarian assistance by states is rather limited. And when it happens, it usually takes – I mean, it fits under the purview of national solidarity or national social support schemes. So it goes a bit, I would say, unscrutinized. The fact that national parliaments only very remotely look at humanitarian questions doesn’t help. That’s true. So, yeah, this puts states in a position of having limited capacity to help, but also taking a bit of a – well, coordinating if you want to put it nicely, or policing if you want to put it more abruptly, positions towards NGOs. Either national or international NGOs, in fact.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you.

Will, when you were on the ground, did you see any part of this? Local NGOs and humanitarian – government-sponsored humanitarian agencies at work?

Mr. Brown: I can’t say I saw much action. Maybe because I wasn’t looking particularly for the kind of government-coordinated side of things. I’m not – but obviously, other local NGOs, there’s – you know, there’s a thousand and one brilliant local NGOs doing really, really good work, particularly on the civil society scene. And if we look at – and something we actually do mention in the report is what is happening currently in Burkina Faso, where local civil rights, civil society NGOs, many of them are kind of being targeted by the government, being crushed, being followed around, and stuff like this. And I think there needs to be more awareness about that on the international scene.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Will.

The next question: Panelists mentioned that some actors are unhappy at being forced to follow this triple nexus approach. What are the critiques and what in practice does nonparticipation in this approach look like? Bill?

Mr. O’Keefe: Yeah. So I think it’s not so much being forced to follow a certain triple nexus approach so explicitly. It’s more some donor funding is being guided in that direction and expectations in terms of proposal development, and so there are donors who won’t fund groups who don’t follow their particular
perspective. I will say, CRS, from BHA and also from USDA, the McGovern-Dole program, has seen the U.S. government be pretty flexible in a good way in making the linkages between humanitarian work, kind of basic social service development work, and then the social cohesion, protection kind of add-on at the community level triple nexus activities, at least from the way that we are positively understanding the benefits of a triple nexus approach.

So that’s a bit of a glancing blow answer to your question, but I think kind of gets at that issue of how the donor environment – it’s complex. It’s – I mean, as I think Will alluded to in the report, there’s an unbelievable web of actors with different definitions, different understandings. But that’s been our experience so far.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Bill.

Ornella, having worked in that space as well, what does that nonparticipation look like, if there was such a thing?

Ms. Morderan: So I agree with what was just said. And I would add that I think the main trend, the main challenge is really in terms of the kind of expectations that the triple nexus discourse creates and imposes on humanitarian agencies. So in a context where it might not be that realistic to expect humanitarian development and hardcore security actors to actually work together in a good understanding, for donors to systematically insist on this creates an incentive framework to say yes, at best, or at least to tell them that we will try. So I wonder really how much this influences just the ways in which proposals are written, with some level of knowing from the start that actually some dimensions might not be possible.

So I think there is a real need from donor side to also just try and understand a bit more proactively what the actual challenges are, and while insisting on having this approach tried, also taking a more proactive role in figuring out how exactly this can happen. So going beyond the injunction towards, you know, having a more active and a more voluntary role in helping fund implementation solutions, really. Yeah. This would be my two cents on this.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, Ornella.

Will, did you have any thought from, again, your experience on the ground covering this?

Mr. Brown: Hmm. I’m sorry, I thought I was on mute. Not on this particular point. But I was looking at one of the other questions, and I was wondering if we could comment on that. Sorry, on the chat?
Mr. Dizolele: Yeah. We’re coming out on our deadline with time, so we still have a few questions that, if we were to engage with them, we will not finish on time. But so is there any specific question you wanted to answer briefly?

Mr. Brown: The broader question, I think, really here is what – someone has posed this – where can outside actors realistically do the most good for durable solutions? And I think that’s at the fundamental core of everything. And I don’t know, I think over the last five years, working in and around the Sahel, what I’ve really noticed is international – how sort of – and I really don’t want to go into cliches here – but how kind of Western-centric or how Western-dominated, or international dominated – how expatriate dominated many of these NGOs and U.N. bodies work in the Sahel are.

And this was really, when I was doing the research for this report, this really hit home to me, kind of, just, again and again, you know, I was talking to kind of project managers who tended to be white, Western expatriates, who couldn’t even visit their projects in the field. And I think kind of this – sort of addressing this issue, developing or acquiring, attainting – obtaining sort of local talent to kind of really – you know, because at the end of the day it’s got to be, you know, a U.N. staffer on $100,000 a year in a white land cruiser is not going to solve this situation. It’s going to be local people talking to each other, local people implementing projects for their communities.

And so I think that sort of democratization, that decentralization, that de-Westernization is really at the fundamental core of what international organizations can do. You know, not speaking down to Africans, speaking with Africans as we try and – we try and say in the report. Thank you.

Mr. Dizolele: Yeah. Thank you very much. We’ve come to the end of our session, but I’ll give the panelists 30 seconds each to make closing remarks, if they have one, so we can wrap this up.

Bill, did you want to –

Mr. O’Keefe: Great. Yeah, I’d love to – thank you. And thanks, fellow panelists. It’s been a great discussion. Just a couple quick points. One, we really feel there needs to be much more attention to some of the root cause issues, particularly around disenfranchisement of pastoralists and other traditionally marginalized communities. And I think there’s a whole nother webinar that needs to be had around that question. Super important point.

Second, I think Will’s point on localization, this is exactly right on. We need much more attention to how to strengthen faith-based and other civil society actors that are part of the community already and have the credibility, and it’s their country. And so we need to figure out how to help them in a much
greater way. Certainly, many of us are working on that already, but this is just yet another example of the importance of it.

And finally, just there needs to be much more diplomatic and humanitarian funding, attention to this crisis. It’s – when I explain the Sahel to people who are following other parts of the world, they’ll say: What’s the Sahel and what’s Burkina Faso? I think we have a huge education crisis to educate donors and to fight for attention to this really important part of the world. And we’re certainly always eternally hopeful, and we’ll keep working towards peace, development, and humanitarian assistance. Thanks so much for the opportunity to be on this panel.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you.

Ms. Morderan: Yes. Very quickly. I second all the points that were just made. And on top of that, I would maybe add that going forward one of the dimensions which humanitarian and development actors have acquired expertise and experience that can transferred to security or broader government actors I think is just the dimension of dialogue and negotiations. Like, making this happen with armed groups on the ground, with nonstate armed actors.

If we are going to implement this idea of going beyond military-first and security-first approach to something that’s more inclusive and political and governance-oriented, I think it will be necessary to initiate, open, or maintain dialogue with some of the key warring actors. And this is something that humanitarian actors have learned to do by the strength of things in the region. And this is probably one area where their expertise can also be called upon and be useful.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, Ornella.

Mr. Brown: I’ve already wrapped up. I just wanted to say thank you so much for everyone attending, and thank you, Mvemba, for hosting. It’s been an absolutely privilege listening to you all. And thank you. And read the report. (Laughs.)

Mr. Dizolele: Yes. So I would like to thank our audience. Sorry we didn’t get to all the questions. As you can imagine, this is an area of huge interest. We appreciate the questions, even though we didn’t get to them. We’d like to thank our distinguished panelists – Bill O’Keefe from CRS, joining us from Maine; Ornella Morderan from ISS, joining us from Bamako; and Will Brown both
from Telegraph and CSIS as a senior associate, joining us from London. Thank you, everyone. We appreciate you. This concludes our session.