

Terms of reference for policy-supporting research

Integrating conflict prevention and mediation into the Belgian comprehensive approach in Mali

1. Context

Belgian development cooperation explicitly targets fragile states. The countries in which the Belgian development cooperation is active are often the scene of violent conflict between different armed groups, state actors or within and between communities. Such conflicts are often a combination of both source and outcome of enduring developmental problems. This is most definitely the case in the Sahel region, which is heavily affected by a “multidimensional crisis” in which conflict dynamics both result from and exacerbate diverse yet interlinked challenges (economic, political, humanitarian, nutritional, environmental, security, etc.). Addressing such challenges requires a Comprehensive Approach (Strategy Note of 2017), in which the different instruments of Belgian foreign action are applied in a strategically coherent and mutually reinforcing manner.

In line with its focus on fragile contexts, **Belgium has the ambition to become a more prominent actor in the field of mediation** (understood as conflict prevention and post-conflict consolidation). In her policy declaration of 5 November 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs states that *“One of the themes on which Belgium will engage even more actively from 2021 concerns conflict prevention and post-conflict consolidation of society. Belgium will support mediation initiatives in its bilateral and multilateral policy, and also take initiatives itself, where its action brings added value.”* This is in line with the policy note the Minister of Development Cooperation of 5 November 2020, in which she declares that *“More resources will be made available for conflict prevention and the consolidation of society. In the long term, a structural anchoring of the instrument of “transitional development” will be aimed at, which will focus in particular on the fight against the root causes of fragility, conflicts and humanitarian crises”*.

The **Sahel** continues to be a priority region in Belgian foreign policy. Because of its fragile nature and strategic geopolitical position at the Southern border of the EU, the country therefore constitutes a **prime arena to put the Belgian comprehensive approach in practice**. Developments in Mali have a wide impact in the broader region, as has been shown by the region-wide spillover since Mali’s security crisis erupted in 2012.

2. What kind of mediation actor? Defining the problem and identifying the fields of activity

A prime question for Belgium is **what kind of mediation actor** we wish to be. Conflict mediation indeed may target different levels at different stages of conflict. In Mali, many different actors are active in mediation with activities ranging from community-level action to high-level political negotiations.¹ In such context Belgium must focus on **added value and complementarity** with other actors and other policy instruments within the Belgian Comprehensive Approach and European Integrated Approach.

Belgium must thus make a **strategic choice** on how to target future mediation activities with regard to the level of intervention, the geographical zone, targeted Malian parties, type of activities, and modalities of intervention.

We may distinguish three **levels of intervention** in the field of mediation: (1) elite-level political mediation; (2) community-level conflict prevention, mediation and consolidation and (3) capacity-building. Belgian engagement in Mali currently focuses on levels 2 and 3. It hence makes sense to develop future mediation activities at these levels, building upon existing experiences, expertise and networks. This should allow Belgium to act as a credible mediation actor.

With regard to the **geographical zone**, Belgian bilateral development cooperation focuses on the region of Koulikoro. Enabel also has activities funded by other actors in the Mopti area. Belgium further funds projects and activities in other regions through UN agencies and missions, EU missions, as well as non-governmental actors.

Malian parties that can be targeted range from government institutions at the national, regional and local level, community organizations, parties involved in conflict, NGOs, women groups, farmers' and pastoralists' movements, etc. It seems sensible to build upon existing partnerships and networks so as to ensure the necessary level of thrust and credibility of Belgium as an actor of mediation. The relation with Malian parties must be sensible towards potential political risks relating to groups ideologies or human rights track record.

The type of activities that can be developed would differ strongly depending on the level of intervention and Malian partners. A non-exhaustive list would involve e.g. support and capacity-building to government institutions involved in mediation, supporting the development of local level mechanisms of conflict prevention and mediation, or partnerships with local universities to train Malian students on topics related to conflict mediation (such as legal pluralism, access to natural resources and ownership rights, etc.).

¹ Different mapping exercises are being/have been done by our British and Swiss colleagues.

Modalities of intervention. Belgian international cooperation consists of different channels under the DGD : bilateral governmental cooperation, non-governmental cooperation, or funding channeled through UN agencies. Belgian foreign affairs further has a budget line dedicated specifically to mediation activities under the DGM. These channels are each best suited for different kinds of activities. We note that reflections and discussions on a new bilateral governmental cooperation agreement with the Malian authorities will be discussed in 2021. It is at this moment an open question whether and how Belgium wishes to integrate mediation activities into this program.

3. Expected results of policy support for Belgian Development Cooperation

The mission of the academic expert ideally starts on 1 March 2021 for a duration of maximum 120 working days.

The expert will have to contribute to strategic reflection on Belgium's positioning as a mediation actor. S/he will do so by engaging with the existing network of Belgian actors as well as existing mediation actors in Mali (this includes building upon earlier mapping exercises executed by other actors), through the organization of one or more workshops in Bamako, as well as the formulation of concrete recommendations with regard to Belgium's strategic positioning as a mediation actor in Mali and in general.

As part of the expert's mission, s/he will ensure to engage strongly with Malian institutions, actors and experts in the field of mediation in order to ensure that Belgian mediation activities start from a realistic perspective of the Malian needs and agendas. S/he will further engage strongly with European and other like-minded actor to ensure harmonization of the international engagement in this field and avoid duplication and institutional competition.

1) Guiding strategic reflection

The expert will engage with Belgian actors in Mali to guide a strategic reflection process on Belgium's positioning as a mediation actor in the country. Such process will involve the organization of one or more workshops with both governmental and non-governmental actors of the Belgian development cooperation, as well as actors involved in other instruments in Belgian action in Mali (diplomats, Min of Defense, experts from EU and/or UN missions and agencies).

2) Recommendations with regard to Belgium's positioning as a mediation actor in the country

The expert will provide a final report containing concrete recommendations.

3) Recommendations with regard to Belgium's positioning as an international mediation actor

Drawing upon the inputs and experiences from the exercise in Mali, the final report of the expert will contain more general recommendations for Belgium's role and positioning as an international mediation actor.