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# Transnational counterterrorism assemblages: the case of preventing and countering violent extremism in Mali

Edoardo Baldaro <sup>a</sup> and Silvia D'Amato <sup>b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article explores how the threat of terrorism has been addressed at the policy level by offering a fine-grained analysis of a specific preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) project implemented in Mali between 2018 and 2021 by a composite mix of international and national practitioners. Despite the current and almost complete detachment from the international and European security community, Mali has been, for a long time, a critical actor in the construction of what we identify as a transnational counterterrorism assemblage. This paper specifically focuses on three parts of the process leading to the assemblage: (1) the context and the political opportunities behind its creation, (2) how a specific north/south epistemic community of experts and practitioners has emerged in Mali and shaped the cognitive, normative and practical dimensions of the policy field and finally (3) the mechanisms at work in the practice of counterterrorism, from design to implementation on the ground. In doing so, the article contributes to the existing academic debate by problematising received interpretations of P/CVE as a north to south transfer of policy priorities and schemes of action. We show how current P/CVE activities are, rather, defining new social standards and practices of security elaborated at the intersection of the north/south divide. We finally offer some reflections on the unexpected consequences of such a construction in relation to the following national and international political crisis of the country.

## KEYWORDS

assemblage; counterterrorism; Global North/Global South; Mali; P/CVE; security expertise

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Counterterrorism as a policy field was once designed, implemented and understood strictly as a security and military response. It was elaborated by a handful of key strategists, who followed the lead of much older thinkers and military leaders. Twenty years after the pivotal date of 11 September 2001, the field is discussed very differently. While there is still no universal solution to the question of what terrorism actually is and how we should respond to it, there is today a general consensus in understanding counterterrorism as a much more disaggregated and diverse

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panorama of interests and actions, in which different actors are carving out their space, authority and power. Indeed, counterterrorism, often associated with the concept of 'preventing and countering violent extremism' (P/CVE), no longer indicates a specific policy area, but rather represents a wide field of concepts, cognitive schemes and policy practices that result in a vast range of strategies, initiatives and programmes (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018).

Given the above, it seems particularly worthwhile to observe the field of P/CVE, since this has reached the status of a comprehensive and transnational framework for action, positioned at the intersection of security, development, humanitarian and other policy domains (Heydemann, 2014). The pervasiveness and blurred boundaries of P/CVE have two main implications, which are the starting point of our contribution. On the one hand, as a field based on uncertainties and fluctuations regarding the aim of intervention and the changes intervention is expected to produce, P/CVE is not a universal recipe that can be easily formalised in procedures and principles (Crelinsten, 2018); rather, it is becoming a domain defined and shaped by negotiations, competition and the mutual influence exerted by the different actors involved. On the other hand, the renewed attention to 'tailor-made' and 'context-sensitive' initiatives and programmes, which characterises the current 'stability-focused' security interventions in conflict-affected contexts (Baldaro & Costantini, 2021), has opened up new spaces of action, negotiation and contribution for 'local' actors (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostić, 2017). However, despite this renewed attention at both the academic and policy level, what still appears to be lacking is an exploration of the relations, negotiations and competition – in a word, the politics – that involve the security experts and practitioners who shape and translate security and P/CVE initiatives into practice. Specifically, very little empirical analysis has been conducted on micro-level initiatives that are in fact quite revealing about the broader structural dynamics of international security. Accordingly, in line with the purpose of this Special Issue (Lopez-Lucia and de Almagro, 2023), this paper contributes to the existing academic debate by analysing the characteristics and developments that have determined the emergence of what we have identified as a new transnational counterterrorism assemblage. Specifically, we intend to do so by describing and analysing the Mali (Dis-)Engagement and Re-Integration related to Terrorism (MERIT) project, a P/CVE initiative implemented in Mali between 2018 and 2021. Mali is a particularly interesting case to look at, particularly in light of the recent political crisis that has led to a full military and political withdrawal of the international community from the country. Yet, before such a historical rupture, Mali had been the centre of multiple international counterterrorism related projects. Among these, MERIT was developed by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) based in the Netherlands and financed by the Danish Embassy in Mali. This 3-year project involved more than 50 different actors, including experts, NGOs, state representatives, mentors and evaluators<sup>1</sup> located between Europe and Mali, constituting a group of people with very diverse backgrounds, expertise and roles. Because of the plurality of the subjects involved, as well as the multiplicity of interests, practices and processes mobilised before and during its implementation, MERIT perfectly showcases the complexities and interactions that characterise P/CVE projects designed and developed at the intersection of different policy spheres and spatial configurations.

As a field, P/CVE has become open to the participation of a composite group of 'experts', designers and implementers, who may create new knowledge and negotiate new practices of social change. The material and symbolic capital they obtain may then be converted into authority and prestige at various levels. Our article gives an empirical demonstration and analysis of these dynamics in the case of Sahel, and in Mali in particular, by focusing on a single P/CVE project undertaken there. Indeed, Mali and the Sahel region provide an ideal case study for examining these trends. As a country affected by a decade-long jihadist insurgency that has expanded to the surrounding region, Mali has been a concern and operative space for a vast range of actors – including international organisations, national authorities, regional initiatives and international

and local NGOs – each of which has elaborated its own strategies and undertaken countless ‘counterterrorist’ projects.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these have been directed in accordance with the given actor’s own diagnosis and prognosis of the ‘terrorist’ threat, producing different unintended consequences within this Sahelian ‘security traffic jam’ (Cold-Ravnkilde & Lindskov Jacobsen, 2020).

Our article focuses on three constitutional elements of the transnational counterterrorism assemblage in Mali: (1) the context and the political opportunities that lay behind its creation; (2) how a specific north/south epistemic community of experts and practitioners emerged in Mali and shaped the cognitive, normative and practical dimensions of the policy field and, finally, (3) the mechanisms at work in the practice of counterterrorism, from design to implementation on the ground. In doing so, the paper aims to problematise received interpretations of P/CVE as a north to south transfer of policy priorities and schemes of action (Moe & Müller, 2018), showing how current P/CVE activities are, in fact, defining new social standards and practices of security elaborated at the intersection of the north/south divide, as well as beyond it.

The article is structured as follows: in the next section, we clarify the theoretical approach informing this contribution, engaging with the most relevant literature and highlighting the advantages of adopting an assemblage perspective. We then provide a brief methodological note, which is followed by the empirical analysis of the case study, building on the three parts of the transnational counterterrorism assemblage in Mali. Finally, the concluding section reviews the key points of the subject matter and its theoretical relevance.

## 2. P/CVE AND TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES

In this paper, we aim to reveal, first, how a certain need for counterterrorism has enabled the construction of a transnational counterterrorism assemblage and, second, what knowledge has been co-produced as a consequence. In line with the conceptualisation advanced in the introduction to this Special Issue, we take a transnational security assemblage to be a space of political interaction that is: (1) generated by the connections between various experts and practitioners working in the field of security; (2) held together by different interests in the domain of counterterrorism and (3) where the multi-sited distribution of ‘usable’ knowledge and practices blurs and reconfigures north/south distinctions and hierarchies. Other frameworks, such as ‘patchwork of counterterrorism’ (D’Amato, 2021) or ‘counter-insurgency governance’ (Charbonneau, 2021), have allowed scholars to shed light on key dynamics of cooperation and the socio-political implications of different forms of intervention. However, as underlined by Lopez Lucia and Martin de Almagro (2023), with an assemblage we would expect to focus on the knowledge produced by these dynamics and, specifically, ‘how knowledge-making is incorporated into practices of state-making, or of governance more broadly and, in reverse, how practices of governance influence the making and use of knowledge’ (Jasanoff, 2004: 3).

In the case of P/CVE, we must focus initially on the way some political dynamics play-out, specifically within a domain where the objects of inquiry and practice do not have a common and uncontested definition but rather constitute a field of meaning and action that is constantly negotiated, contested and open to change. When looking at ‘terrorism’, most political violence scholars insist on the problematic and essentially political conceptualisations and definitions of the phenomenon (Jackson, 2016). In academic and policy circles alike two tendencies – one ‘widening’, the other ‘narrowing’ – can be observed. With some, there is a tendency for terrorism to be overlapped, equated and finally blurred with other expressions of violent political contention, such as insurgencies and guerrilla warfare (Martini & Njoku, 2017). Others instead assert the uniqueness of terrorism, underlining its transnational and deterritorialised nature, for instance, and its specific ideological basis (Kalyvas, 2018). This lack of clarity predominates in the debates about the causes and triggers of terrorism, creating a cacophony of competing approaches that attempt to identify explanations and/or generalisable causal mechanisms, drawn from different disciplines and using different levels of analysis.

Aside from the question of definition, there are other political dynamics in the fight against terrorism, especially when it is conducted through a collaboration between the so-called Global North, i.e., Western countries acting as 'donors' and 'recipient' countries from the so-called Global South. There is, first of all, the issue of authoritative knowledge (Toivanen, 2010) that is often imposed on specific but diverse socio-political and security realities. There is also the issue of the role and interests of the ensemble of actors responsible for these projects, meaning the experts, practitioners and political personalities who gravitate around the production of certain initiatives and policy measures. Probably more than other policy fields, the fight against terrorism has witnessed a significant increase in demand since the 1970s and one that has continued to rise, especially after the attacks of 11 September 2001 (D'Amato, 2019). The field of 'terrorism expertise' has become rather crowded and a place where various experts operate and disseminate knowledge and knowhow. However, as mentioned above, the only real consensus that exists in both the academic and policy fields is that there is no consensus regarding the definition and understanding of terrorism and how one ought to collect data about it (Ganor, 2002; Richards, 2014). Questions thus arise in relation to what kind of knowledge is considered appropriate and reliable for a P/CVE initiative and what kind of role experts, policy designers and implementers play in producing and co-producing this knowledge. Thanks to a particularly prolific strand of research in terrorism studies, namely critical terrorism studies (CTS), we now know that knowledge in this field is rarely objective or neutral (van Um & Pisiu, 2015). For many, this is often because of the interest states have in financing a sympathetic 'terrorism industry' (Herman & O'Sullivan, 1989), it being borne in mind that this expertise has been developed in parallel to state counterterrorism efforts. Indeed, through a process of knowledge production and dissemination, a constellation of actors, including academics, experts and consultants, all of whom have their own specific ideas, interests and affiliations, can significantly influence the way measures to fight terrorism are received or implemented (Russo & Selenica, 2022), thus functioning as 'knowledge entrepreneurs' (Moe & Müller, 2018, p. 197). In this sense, states are no longer 'just the primary sponsor of knowledge-production, but also the primary consumer of research' (Stampnitzky, 2011, p. 7).

When considered in the context of the north-south relationship (de Sousa Santos, 2014), these dynamics have some additional implications that are worth exploring. Indeed, issues around the 'global' fight against terrorism and the recent 'migration crisis' have shown the important interconnections between countries at peace and areas which suffer from conflict, political instability and generalised insecurity. In light of these increasing interconnections, the number of projects directed from 'north' to 'south' has skyrocketed. However, the development of projects in the field of P/CVE is likely to reproduce problems of dependency, lack of accountability and difficulties of implementation that are similar to those observed in other contexts, such as education programmes (Novelli, 2017), support for the rule of law (Westerman, 2017), military intervention (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostić, 2017), human rights programmes (Toivanen, 2010) and development assistance (Duffield, 2007). More than any other field, however, the 'War on Terror' has facilitated a particularly prolific process of reappropriation through strategies of extraversion of these north-south dynamics (Fisher, 2012; Ricard, 2017). Studies have provided some recent examples of increased locally-owned security initiatives in a context of Western and non-Western cooperation (Moe & Müller, 2018), revealing a growing attempt to rebalance the power relations that dominate this particular field of cooperation. In line with what has also been observed in the domain of peacebuilding, this latter point raises key questions about the role, the interests, the power, but also the identification of 'local' actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015). Drawing on this counter-intuitive insight, we explore how 'local' agents position themselves and participate in the processes of knowledge and practices production. They do so by exploiting the spaces and possibilities offered by the transnational field of counterterrorism and ultimately help to create new transnational social standards and security practices. In this sense, we find the idea of the 'international' as symbolic capital (Basaran & Olsson, 2018) particularly interesting.

The dynamics of 'co-optation' of northern experts, along with the role they play in the process of producing knowledge and policy 'solutions', have already been discussed in fields as varied as development (Mosse, 2008), migration (Stierl, 2020) and counterterrorism (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in a context characterised by a growing 'securitisation' of on-field research and activities, where northern researchers and practitioners face increasing difficulties in negotiating access to conflict-affected areas (Ferraro, 2021; Peter & Strazzari, 2017), specific and critical attention must be devoted to 'local' experts and the way they co-participate in producing security knowledge and counterterrorism practices.

Here we find reference to the idea of 'local' experts functioning as 'brokers of development' (Bierschenk et al., 2000). Partly relying on the concept of 'African extraversion' (Bayart & Ellis, 2000), this approach tends to identify local actors as agents capable of exploiting their position between the local and the global as a way to access 'development rents' produced by international aid. Both these approaches focus on the interests, resources and strategies that African agents have and pursue in their relations with 'external' actors and institutions. Both further attribute to African agents the power and capacity not only to participate, but also to shape the transnational policy field in which they are embedded.

By looking at the way 'local' actors have accessed economic and political support to implement P/CVE-related projects it should be possible to explore the international politics of counterterrorism as a form of power exchange between actors situated in different parts of the world. We are interested in doing so by focusing on the transnationality of these connections and moving beyond a strict north-south division. There is an urgent need for analysis of this, as very little has been revealed about how the dynamic plays out in minor projects that are nonetheless quite revealing of key dynamics within the counterterrorism universe.

Starting from these premises, with this article we show the process by which the transnational counterterrorism assemblage is constructed and expect to observe 'a process of socio-political (re)ordering and transformation which underpins and (re)allocates legitimacy and authority' (Lopez Lucia and Martin de Almagro, this Special Issue: 17). We do so by focusing on the P/CVE project MERIT, elaborated and implemented in Mali between June 2018 and March 2021. Three dynamics central to the labour of assembling are explored. First, we focus on the first part of the constitution of an assemblage: the context and political authority that lie at the basis of the creation of the policy need. This gives us a preliminary overview of the practice of problematisation, meaning the way in which the issue to be addressed has been evaluated, discussed and presented. Moreover, this will help us to understand whether counterterrorism knowledge has generated constitutive effects on governance actors and, if so, what kind of counterterrorism knowledge has been generated.

In the second part, we look at the role, authority and distribution of power between the actors involved in the creation of the counterterrorism assemblage. Here the interest also lies in understanding the specific transnational nature of the connections, exploring how they move between and beyond Global South-Global North boundaries.

Finally, the third part of the assemblage is devoted to the practice of counterterrorism. Specifically, by analysing both the design and implementation phases of MERIT, we consider the part of the assemblage that manifests processes of reappropriation through negotiation and bargaining between the designers and the implementers, who are responsible for the practical delivery and materialisation of the knowledge.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The approach presented in this article calls for an elaboration on the so-called 'researcher-researched relationship' and requires some thought about the positionality of the researchers. As scholars and (occasionally) consultants who come from the Global North and work on Mali and the Sahel we are, in some measure, part of the transnational field of experts of counterterrorism under scrutiny

**Table 1.** Data gathering on MERIT.**Evaluation process phase** (February and March 2021)

Interviews (23 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five project organisers from ICCT (three) and UNICRI (two);</li> <li>• two employees of the donor's Embassy;</li> <li>• four prisons guards and personnel of the penitentiary system;</li> <li>• five participants in the 'young leaders' programme;</li> <li>• six implementers/mentors;</li> <li>• one former local counsellor of the donor's Embassy</li> </ul>
Online questionnaire (33 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 young leaders;</li> <li>• two trainers (one of whom was also a mentor);</li> <li>• three employees of partner NGOs (two of whom were also mentors);</li> <li>• four mentors</li> </ul>

**Post evaluation process phase** (May 2021–May 2022)

Follow-up interviews (three respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One former local counsellor of the donor's Embassy;</li> <li>• one local member of the evaluation team;</li> <li>• one project organiser</li> </ul>
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in this paper. If this condition allows us to present ourselves as 'insiders' vis-à-vis the topic analysed here, it also forces us to maintain a critical and self-reflexive approach to our work (Jackson, 2016; Stierl, 2020). We have tried to reduce the impact of the unavoidable cognitive biases and ethical tensions characterising this research endeavour by engaging with the concept of 'critical friendship' (Holvikivi, 2019, p. 132). We have constantly questioned our role and location in the field and engaged in a continuous exchange with our 'researched' colleagues in order to better grasp the mechanisms of knowledge production in which we take part.

It is also important to clarify the position we occupied during the research process. Indeed, one of the authors of this paper led the external research team that between March and April 2021 conducted the evaluation of the project MERIT. This role gave almost complete access to the various internal documents produced by the project organisers throughout the programme, as well as to most of the actors involved. A complete list of the interviews and surveys realised during and after the evaluation process, as well as the internal briefs and various progress reports consulted during the same timeframe, is available in Table 1. When preparing this article, we requested and obtained authorisation by the ICCT and UNICRI to name them and project MERIT and to employ the material collected during the evaluation, including interviews and surveys that were realised only after participants had given their informed consent. Because of the political sensitivity of the topic, we agreed to guarantee the anonymity of the local organisations, experts and participants who took part in MERIT. For this reason, in the discussion of the empirical case we will not name the local organisations involved, while the transcription of the only interview directly quoted in the text has been personally authorised by the (anonimised) interviewee.

#### 4. THE COUNTERTERRORISM ASSEMBLAGE IN MALI

As mentioned previously, the P/CVE project MERIT was a transnational project elaborated and implemented in Mali that involved a number of actors from Europe and Mali at different levels of governance.

Initially, MERIT was intended to focus on improving the rehabilitation and reintegration of Malian violent extremist offenders (VEOs) in and after prison, by developing a risk assessment tool to be distributed to staff working in the Malian prisons hosting VEOs. However, even before the project had been launched, negotiations among stakeholders resulted in the addition of a second line of action, namely capacity-building and awareness training sessions that targeted a selected group of 'young leaders' with the goal of supporting and reinforcing their role as positive forces of change against violent extremism.

In the following, we analyse how the development of MERIT could shed light on various dynamics that lie behind the creation of what we identify as a counterterrorism assemblage. Specifically, the following analysis reveals the political and security context that allowed such a project to be discussed and implemented and the creation and solidification of a transnational network of actors.

#### 4.1. Assemblage part 1: the context of Mali as an international hub for counterterrorism

The context and political opportunities that enable the creation of the counterterrorism assemblage in Mali are related to the possibilities offered by an international context largely dominated by the necessities of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). Notwithstanding the current tensions between the Malian transitional government and its (former) regional and international partners,<sup>3</sup> for almost twenty years Mali has been a privileged case study with which to observe how security assemblages have emerged and influenced the field of counterterrorism in a post 9/11 international setting. Identified as the epicentre of so-called 'Sahelistan' (Malejacq & Sandoz, 2020), Mali has progressively become a critical hub for counterterrorism – European counterterrorism in particular – in the Sahel region and beyond. This transformation has turned Mali into a case that encapsulates some of the main trends that have characterised security relations along the north/south axis since 2001.

Mali belongs to that 'global periphery' which has been most directly affected by the consequences of the GWOT (Smith, 2009). Following the identification of 'fragile states' and 'ungoverned spaces' as some of the main threats to (Western) security (Patrick, 2011), various countries and regions in the Global South have been transformed into local sites of a wider fight against transnational violent extremisms. In the case of the African continent, several areas, ranging from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel, have been reframed in terms of in/securities, transforming local grievances, institutional weaknesses and economic underdevelopment into potential global threats (Abrahamsen, 2005; Williams, 2007). As the actor who declared and started the 'Long War', the United States were the first to frame and define this transnational security endeavour. By developing a representation of the continent as a constellation of "war-ravaged areas and vast swathes of ungoverned territory," [that] offers ideal conditions for extremists looking for a foothold' (Metelits, 2014, p. 2), Africa soon became understood as the second front of the GWOT (Ryan, 2011).

Mali specifically, long considered a reliable partner by Western powers, became an important associate in the American strategy for fighting terrorism in Africa. In order to strengthen the military and security capabilities of local authorities, for a decade the country received almost unconditional political and financial support from northern donors, while the Malian security forces were trained and equipped through numerous capacity-building initiatives organised under the wider counterterrorism umbrella (Baldaro, 2018). This unconditional support for security necessities eventually strengthened what emerged as a predatory and dysfunctional system of governance implemented by the Malian regime, which paved the way for the crisis of 2012 (Lecocq et al., 2013). This was marked by the ignition of a separatist and jihadist insurgency which is still ravaging the country and a military coup d'état that put an end to twenty years of 'democratic' rule in the country. The collapse of the Malian state and worsening of the crisis



that has expanded from northern Mali towards Niger, Burkina Faso and potentially other west African states (ICG, 2019), has created the conditions for a renewed security and counterterrorism mobilisation of a wide range of actors. While the American presence in the area has been partly redefined, though not reduced (Tankel, 2020), over the last ten years Mali and the Sahel have become a veritable 'laboratory of experimentation' for the European Union (Lopez-Lucia, 2017) in the domains of security, conflict-management and counterterrorism. The EU and various EU member states – including France, Germany, Italy, Spain and others – have developed a complex and multifaceted presence in the area, which is now seen as the dangerous 'southern border' of the European continent (Venturi, 2019). At the same time, Western states and organisations are not the only actors who have reinforced their presence there. Indeed, over the same period, the centrality assumed by the Sahel in the African (and international) security landscape has led various regional organisations, such as the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States and the Arab Maghreb Union, to elaborate specific strategies for the region (Baldaro & Lopez Lucia, 2022). Over time, this trajectory has been followed by other states, institutions and non-governmental organisations of various geographical origins and as a result this complex security architecture has generated a veritable 'security traffic jam' in the area (Cold-Ravnkilde & Lindskov Jacobsen, 2020).

Within this operative context, there has been a progressive move towards a more holistic understanding of the terrorist phenomenon that has found a particularly fertile setting in Mali. P/CVE initiatives have begun to be influenced by a progressive expansion and opening towards other policy fields, such as conflict management, good governance and development programmes. As the case of MERIT will also show, most of the actors involved on the ground have framed and defended the contributions of these policy fields within new P/CVE strategies (Charbonneau, 2019). Consequently, think tanks and NGOs that employ local experts, or which had previously created local branches, such as the Institute for Security Studies (Bamako office), International Alert Mali, Mercy Corps Mali, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD), Think Peace Mali, SNV and Danish Demining Group Mali, all of whose action was previously deployed in the humanitarian and conflict-management sectors, have started to be associated with P/CVE programmes launched by various international stakeholders.

In brief, the combination of the international legitimacy enjoyed by P/CVE programmes in light of the GWOT and the progressive expansion of the traditional counterterrorism field towards more comprehensive and multifaceted initiatives has provided an optimal context for a transnational project like MERIT. In what follows, the analysis will focus on the actors surrounding MERIT, how it emerged and its implications for the Global North/Global South relations in counterterrorism.

#### 4.2. Assemblage part 2: mapping the universe and role of experts redefining terrorism and counterterrorism in Mali

In part 1 we have seen how, in direct relation to the crowded field of security and counterterrorism actors that characterises the Malian landscape, the number of initiatives in the domains of security, conflict-management and P/CVE has skyrocketed. Not surprisingly, this increase in the number of initiatives has corresponded to an increase in the range of actors, whether these are private or public, involved at various levels of governance. From international organisations to national authorities, regional programmes and international and local NGOs, all these actors have undertaken countless projects aimed at tackling the 'terrorist threat' in the country, often in collaborative forms. Moreover, this increasing security engagement has also been reflected in a growing demand, and market, for specialised expertise and scholarly knowledge in the (counter)-terrorism domain.

Hence, an expanding transnational community of experts has begun to work on the motivations and mechanisms of extremist ideologies, as well as on factors of resilience and/or

vulnerability of local populations vis-à-vis violent radical discourses and behaviours, mostly from a policy perspective.

The resulting academic and policy knowledge, produced by a somewhat limited transnational community of experts – in which the authors of this paper actively participate, as discussed above – has identified various factors, ranging from psychological and communitarian/ethnic to economic, ideological and politico-institutional elements, that explain the decision to engage in and/or support extremist insurgencies and violent behaviours. A consensus has emerged around the idea that no one variable is more influential than all the others in fuelling engagement in violence and that all variables must be observed and analysed in their interaction and inserted within their wider socio-political and institutional context (Raineri et al., 2020).

As mentioned above, MERIT was proposed, designed and implemented by two international research centres: the ICCT, which is based in the Netherlands, runs various security initiatives and has a limited but visible security presence in Mali and UNICRI, an agency that is part of the UN ‘clan’ at the centre of the strategies of stabilisation and conflict-management in the area. Both research centres, as well as the people in charge of the project, had previous experience of working in the area and of running projects in collaboration with one another. The project was funded by the Danish Embassy in Mali, which had been involved in P/CVE initiatives in Mali that developed a specific focus on the social challenges posed by the terrorist presence in the area. As interested stakeholders, whose collaboration was necessary for running the programme, the Malian Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, the Malian Ministry of Religious Affairs and Faith and the National Directorate of Prison Administration and Supervised Education (DNAPES) were also involved in the project.<sup>4</sup> Various local experts and NGOs were included, with the expectation that they would support the organisers in the implementation of the programme. Finally, as regards participants, the project involved and worked with two principal groups: first, around 20 prison guards and personnel from the penitentiary system based in Bamako and Koulikoro, who had had direct contact with people in jail suspected of being VEOs; and second, around 30 so-called ‘young leaders’, pre-selected youths who were already engaged in conflict resolution or other socially-based activities aimed at countering the spread of violence in the country.

It should be highlighted immediately that at least three of the Malian researchers who formed this transnational group of experts eventually received political appointments as special counselors of Malian or regional decision-makers and organisations because of their involvement in Mali’s P/CVE field. A similar trajectory will be shown for some of the local experts and practitioners who participated in MERIT. In this sense, the participation of local analysts in this transnational community of experts produced interesting effects at the domestic level and on state knowledge. Indeed, their role in the counterterrorism assemblage was put to use as ‘international capital’, namely, a strategic resource that can be used within domestic politics and policy circles (Basaran & Olsson, 2018). Overall, the interaction between international experts working for security-related institutions such as UNICRI or the ICCT and ‘local experts’ involved in some form with international projects confirms many of the insights highlighted by the existing literature on extraversion and the role of brokers of development. Since they are actors with a specific set of resources in terms of access and understanding of the context (Mwambari, 2019), ‘local’ experts effectively have the power to fully participate in and shape the field of security expertise in Mali. Moreover, as we will further explore in the next section, the very presence of these people – who usually have international connections and degrees – as ‘local voices’ (Schroeder, 2018) conferred MERIT with greater legitimacy and inclusiveness, opening up numerous opportunities for the content of the project to be negotiated.

Building on this, in what follows our analysis will focus on the design of the intervention and the selection of the participants. It will show how a north/south approach to P/CVE emerged

and how this was produced and implemented by negotiating the interests, beliefs and know-how of both northern and southern experts and practitioners.

### 4.3. Assemblage part 3: the practice of designing, negotiating and implementing the intervention

An analysis of MERIT allows us to zoom in on dynamics of reappropriation, by which we mean moments of negotiation and bargaining between the actors involved in different stages of the project. It is here that we observe how the implementers, practitioners and professionals working in the field, often affiliated with 'local' NGOs, are able to use their expertise as a strategic asset and co-participate in the production of a system of knowledge and practices that corresponds to their capacities and interests. This reappropriation by key 'local' actors, the case of MERIT shows, not only results in changes to the practical delivery of the project, but also translates into the acquisition of political authority and legitimacy at the domestic level.

#### 4.3.1. Content negotiation and bargaining

According to internal documents consulted during the evaluation phase preceding MERIT between 2016 and the beginning of 2018, the ICCT and UNICRI worked on a project that focused on alleged VEOs detained in the prisons of Bamako and Koulikoro. During this period, they created contacts with certain key national stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Faith, the DNAPES, various prison directors and members of prison staff, educators, social workers and religious leaders.

Building on this previous experience, when asked to elaborate a proposal for a new project to be implemented in Mali, three employees of the ICCT assumed leadership of the initiative. In line with their academic background and their organisation's characteristic approach, the project implemented between 2016 and 2018 developed a diagnosis of terrorism and a subsequent 'theory of change'<sup>5</sup> based on a cognitive and psychological understanding of the phenomenon. Aiming to reinforce and expand an operation in which the three experts had already gained experience and contacts, the initial idea was to propose a follow-up to the previous programme, focusing on their work in prisons and carried out in collaboration with the stakeholders who had already been involved. More specifically, the three experts were particularly vocal in proposing an action thought to address and respond to the mechanisms of individual radicalisation identified during their work in prison. Up to this point, the two researchers working for UNICRI maintained only a complementary position in the elaboration of the new initiative and the possibility of adding a second line of action to be run outside of the prison system was not really considered.

This initial proposal was strongly supported by the DNAPES and the Ministry of Religious Affairs – the two Malian institutions in charge of the rehabilitation of VEOs – which insisted on the structural weaknesses characterising the penitentiary environment in Mali. The organisers and the national stakeholders then identified prison staff as being vital to the pursuit of a strategy of counter-radicalisation and to distinguishing between the different profiles and needs of VEOs. The proposal was to offer a practical instrument designed to support prison staff in their daily work in light of a general lack of the necessary training to deal with specific cases. The main instrument and focus consisted of a new risk assessment tool, designed and elaborated by a group of experts linked to the ICCT in collaboration with scholars and practitioners from the US, who were involved on the basis of personal connections.<sup>6</sup> On these premises, in spite of the acknowledgement of the local authorities, this proposal could be understood as a classical north-to-south transfer of policy instruments and knowledge based on targeted training to reinforce the specific capacities of a limited group of individuals.

However, a window of opportunity opened at the moment the project was presented to the funder. A significant change in the design of the programme was now possible, favoured by the emergence of an alternative approach to P/CVE advanced both by 'international' and 'local'

practitioners. More specifically, at that time (2018), two people were working at the Danish Embassy with the mandate of selecting the most promising initiatives to be supported in the P/CVE domain. While the first secretary in charge of the political, P/CVE and stabilisation initiatives was a Danish national, his counsellor was one of those 'local' experts who had already been involved with the transnational community engaged in developing research and expertise on violent extremism in Mali. His work was also already known to the two researchers working at UNICRI. More importantly, these three key actors, the first secretary, his counsellor and the two researchers at UNICRI, shared a similar interpretation of the 'terrorist' threat in Mali. Rather than seeing violent extremism as the expression of a cognitive and individual process of radicalisation, these actors interpreted terrorist insurgencies as a political and socially rooted phenomenon that had to be addressed in a more comprehensive and socially-oriented way. In consequence, during the numerous meetings and consultations that took place before the final presentation of the project, the employees of the Embassy and the organisers agreed on the need to include a second component in the project.

The revised concept insisted on the fact that the process of reintegration of VEOs into society would need to go beyond the period spent in prison. Accordingly, as well as the need to rehabilitate former VEOs, it was imperative that there be a sound and sustainable strategy so that their reinsertion into society would be implemented in synergy with their communities of origin and/or reinsertion. Hence, youth engagement and empowerment outside prisons became a key priority in parallel with the work with the prisoners, since most VEOs are young people, who are particularly exposed to extremist groups' radical messages.

When asked about the final design of the project, the former local focal point of the Embassy said:

I think it is innovative [...], because it selected young people from different places that suffer from problems linked to violent extremism and radicalisation. But [...] the project is also innovative because it aims at working in the penitentiary environment with those [...] who are supposed to be terrorists or jihadists, in order to prepare these people for the moment they will be freed [...] making them able to reintegrate their societies. It aims at avoiding that they get rejected from their society, rather making them actors of development [...].

Thanks to the two components, working with detainees and working with young people who are leaders in their communities and who could engage in projects and initiatives for raising awareness among their peers in their respective communities [...], you have prevention and also management of violent extremism. The prevention is organised with the young leaders in their respective communities, while the management is done with those who are already in the penitentiary environment.<sup>7</sup>

This comment, we argue, reveals the process through which the idea of developing an integrated project made of two components – one in prison and one outside the penitentiary environment – came about as the result of the encounter and synthesis of different approaches to P/CVE advanced by different actors with different positions in the field of P/CVE. While the DNAPES secured the necessary funding to train the prisons' guards and further their capacity in dealing with VEOs, the employees of the ICCT exploited their previous experience and their initial leading role in the elaboration of the action to create a follow-up to their past project and reinforce their role as organisers of P/CVE initiatives in Mali. At the same time, the employees of UNICRI also managed to influence the way MERIT was designed – adding a 'social' component to the initiative – thus regaining an unexpected centrality vis-à-vis both their partners and their employer. This win-win situation was reached by reframing the concept of P/CVE, advancing a strategic distinction between the two components of preventing and countering violent extremism: while the 'cognitive' approach was recognised as being more useful for dealing with

VEOs in prison (managing violent extremism), working with the youth was presented as the right way to address the root causes of terrorism (preventing violent extremism).

At the same time, the negotiation process behind MERIT also influenced state knowledge and practices, affecting the way the Malian state dealt with violent extremism. Indeed, during the project's preliminary meetings, high-level representatives from the Malian Ministry of Religious Affairs – tasked with elaborating the Malian counterterrorism strategy – were also present. Soon after the project's approval, the local focal point of the donor Embassy was hired as a consultant by the Ministry and charged with participating in the revision of the draft of the new strategy for countering and preventing violent extremism. The rationale and lines of action of the project corresponded to the first pillar of the Malian P/CVE Strategy, published in 2018. This stated the need to identify and address the social and political causes furthering violent extremism and the simultaneous need to strengthen the work being carried out with VEOs detained in the penitentiary system (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Faith, 2018). As acknowledged by our interviewees, the personal ties that the formal local focal point created during the designing phase of MERIT, and the support he obtained from the other participants in the P/CVE initiative, were crucial elements that allowed him to obtain an influential position vis-à-vis the Malian institutions in charge of drafting the national P/CVE strategy. This is evidently a case that demonstrates the importance of international capital gained by local experts when participating in the design of a project and being part of a transnational expertise that has been translated into political authority at the domestic level.

#### *4.3.2. Participants and activities: creating 'bottom-up' social capital*

In the mid-term progress report from the end of 2019, the MERIT organisers reported that two overall modifications to the project had already been implemented, both related to the work being carried out with young Malians. First, the organisers and the concerned stakeholders had agreed on merging two distinct training modules into a broader joint Youth Empowerment and Engagement module. Second, while the programme had originally envisaged working with 75 different youth leaders, it had been decided that a core group of 30 of the most committed youths would be selected and that these would continue to participate in subsequent activities.

During the final evaluation process, it was revealed that these decisions were mainly taken after extensive consultations with the local partner organisations. Indeed, according to the proposal presented to the donor in 2018, the 'youth component' of the project was supposed to be developed in two main steps. During a first phase, 'empowerment meetings' open to the participation of a fairly large group of 'young leaders' would be organised, proposing debates and discussions aiming at demonstrating that it was possible to engage in political discourse without violence. A further 'mentoring program' would target the most committed among the participants, proposing that they develop regular exchanges with previously selected local 'mentors', namely local experts and members of Malian civil society ready to offer more practical training and suggestions to some of the 'young leaders'. The second step would have implied dialogue sessions in the prison context – between some VEOs and the most engaged 'young leaders' – and the discussion of alternatives to violence. At this point, the youth component of the project was still seen as a sort of complementary activity, believed to support the work with the VEOs.

When the time came to start organising the action with the young people, local partners advocated for two principal modifications, insisting on the need to work with a preselected and limited group of individuals, in order to offer them a wide range of training sessions that were not necessarily focused solely on 'narrowly-intended' P/CVE activities. To justify this stance, they underlined the importance of elaborating an action adapted to the structure and needs of local societies. As regards the component of the project aimed at supporting positive social change within the different Malian communities, local partners insisted on engaging with participants who had already demonstrated their will to act as actors of change and who

already had a certain legitimacy within their communities thanks to their previous participation in other development-related projects. In addition, in order to build and reinforce the social capital of these ‘young leaders’, the initiative ought to prioritise more practical training – in areas such as ‘media literacy’, ‘public engagement’ and ‘conflict-management’ – so as to offer more usable knowledge and skills.

The suggestions elaborated by local partners and implementers were rapidly supported by the new local focal point of the donor Embassy – another member of the transnational community of experts presented above – and by the two employees of UNICRI. As actors advocating for a more comprehensive and socially-oriented approach to P/CVE, both these actors had an interest in reinforcing the youth component of the project and in creating a clear distinction vis-à-vis the work in the penitentiary environment – a solution that would guarantee them greater autonomy and centrality in the execution of the project.

The previously mentioned distinction between the ‘preventing’ and ‘countering’ components of P/CVE and the strategic insistence on a holistic understanding of counterterrorism, were key in achieving a positive synthesis between the different proposals. While the prison component of the project was implemented as initially planned, the youth component was reorganised following most of the suggestions of the local partners.

The project was successful in involving youths from geographically diverse Malian administrative regions, including Bamako, Gao, Kayes, Kidal, Mopti, Ségou, Sikasso and Timbuktu and in identifying individuals with a demonstrated track record of leadership and strong motivation for P/CVE-related activities. Overall, this part of the project intercepted and reinforced a dynamic of bottom-up empowerment for the young leaders. That this was a particularly important point was demonstrated by the wide range of replies participants gave when they were asked to explain the (perceived) principal aim of the activities they were taking part in. While they were all aware of the fact that the project was supposed to be a P/CVE initiative, participants indicated the following as the project’s principal objectives: conflict management, good governance, reinforcing societal resilience, improving the public debate, creating new economic opportunities and offering an integrated education. What thus emerges is that, aside from their general satisfaction with the project, the experiences of the various local participants appeared to be multiple and differentiated and only loosely connected to the issue of the violent insurgencies plaguing the country.

In a sense, this aspect of MERIT was particularly revealing of the consequences of the negotiation between international organisers and the local practitioners leading implementation. Far from being merely a ‘context-sensitive’ exercise implemented by external donors, local actors managed to secure a restructuring of the participatory platform, while inserting the contribution of this project within a broader framework of knowledge exchange and formation. This solution implicitly reinforced an already existing ‘wide’ interpretation of P/CVE, while it also showed how different lines of action and priorities could coexist and co-participate in favouring what has purposely been defined loosely as ‘social change’. Local partners managed to shape the project towards their own priorities, while international actors remained satisfied because they were still getting to label it as a P/CVE project. Overall, the two components of the project finally found a way to create original and fruitful synergies. Indeed, at the end of the evaluation process, a final initiative was still under implementation. This concerned the meeting of the most motivated young participants with the VEOs who were expected to be freed shortly and its principal aim was to follow VEOs’ reinsertion into society, through the support of previously trained ‘young leaders’.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has addressed the question of knowledge co-production along the Global North/South axis, focusing on the construction of a transnational assemblage in the field of

counterterrorism. Specifically, by building on recent debates about conflict and intervention studies, counterterrorism and north–south knowledge production and exchange, the paper has analysed an international P/CVE project, MERIT, implemented in Mali.

This paper makes an original contribution by focusing on the micro-dimension of international P/CVE knowledge and project implementation. We presented insights gathered during the design and implementation of MERIT, which was conducted between 2018 and 2021 in Bamako and Koulikoro. We zoomed in on the type of knowledge that was considered to be relevant and exchangeable during three phases of the labour of assembling: the context and political authority, the role, authority and distribution of power between the actors involved in the creation of the counterterrorism assemblage and, finally, the practice of counterterrorism between project design and implementation. On the basis of the case presented here, a few considerations may be put forward regarding how knowledge is produced, negotiated and employed in the P/CVE domain, in particular when the intervention is directed towards a country of the Global South and implies the participation of Western actors and security deliverers.

The lack of a clear conceptualisation and the blurred policy boundaries characterising P/CVE seem to be a strategic asset for the heterogeneous group of experts and practitioners who participate in the definition and implementation of P/CVE projects and initiatives. Indeed, as our case study shows, their field's indefiniteness of action allows these actors to pursue parallel – but not necessarily opposing – agendas and objectives, which are influenced by personal interests as much as by institutional incentives or political beliefs. In the case of MERIT, this was translated into the planning and implementation of a project that contained and simultaneously pursued different approaches and 'theories of change' regarding P/CVE. The project worked with different and separated constituencies, elaborated specific practices of intervention and was carried out in a way that was generally appreciated by all the actors and subjects involved. Hence, the counterterrorism assemblage appears to be an ad hoc and contingent construction, which nonetheless creates and maintains an internal coherence and legitimacy that is not necessarily linked to the impact of the actions produced.

Our approach allowed us to enlarge the focus on the processes of re-appropriation of 'local actors' involved in the universe of P/CVE, in order to show how they are able to influence knowledge but also gain 'capital' in the form of power, legitimacy, as well as social and material resources. In this sense we showed that the implementation of a minor P/CVE project also opened up new opportunities concerning the creation of knowledge and the definition of actions in the P/CVE domain. We also saw the emergence and stabilisation – at least until recently – of a new transnational ensemble of experts and practitioners that shaped cognitive, normative and practical dimensions of the projects by allowing 'local' experts to position and re-position themselves between the local and the international. In this sense, we argue, by analysing the role of the transnational expert community in the process of creation of a security assemblage, and the exchanges that take place within it, we can secure concrete information about the way counterterrorism is co-produced.

To conclude, we believe that the case of Mali allows us to support a strong argument about the political and pragmatic nature of counterterrorism, which is often a result of a series of exchanges and negotiations that happen at different levels of the security practice. Until recently, Mali was a quintessential example of a country in the spotlight of international counterterrorism efforts and, as such, a space for interventions by many institutions, governments and organisations in response to P/CVE necessities. Our focus on the transnational counterterrorism assemblage showcased the political, contextual and negotiated nature of the policy of counterterrorism, as well as of the ensemble of experts and practices, deemed legitimate, that are built around it. The events that have followed the coup d'état led by Colonel Assimi Goïta in May 2021 appear to confirm this. New domestic power dynamics, with a military junta building its legitimacy around its contestation of the conditions of international and regional security engagement in

the country, have brought into question the first step of the construction of the assemblage, i.e., the international and national political context that enables transnational exchange. In other words, the rupture with the Global North-Global South transnational relationship has led to a progressive collapse of the counterterrorism assemblage.

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## NOTES

1. One of the authors of this article participated in the project as an external evaluator of MERIT. For further considerations about the positionality of the authors and its implications in terms of access and potential biases, see the methodological note.
2. A linguistic and conceptual clarification is needed here: in this article, unless indicated otherwise, by "regional" we mean "macro-regional" organisations and spaces (such as the Sahel), whereas by "local" we mean "national/domestic". This choice is in line with how international relations literature – unlike geography – usually employs and conceptualises these terms (Fawn, 2009). It also reproduces the use of these terms made by the transnational network of experts/practitioners under scrutiny here.
3. Following the military coup d'état of May 2021, the new Malian government has decided to terminate most of the security and counterterrorism agreements signed with its international partners, a decision which is bringing into question the security architecture deployed in the country throughout the last decade.
4. Even after decades of decentralisation reforms implemented in Mali, security, counterterrorism and most of the associated policies and activities have remained strongly centralised sectors that are essentially planned, defined and implemented in Bamako. This lack of delegation and decentralisation of power explains the absence of sub-national institutions involved in the MERIT project.
5. 'Theory of Change' is a widely diffused expression in policy and academic circles alike, usually employed to describe the methodology followed for planning, managing and evaluating a specific project or policy initiative and for clarifying the kind of consequences that the action is expected to generate (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). We opted here to maintain this wording, as this was the expression employed by most of the interviewees when asked to explain their approach vis-à-vis MERIT.
6. We can remark here that these personal connections had been built at least in part during the implementation of the previous P/CVE project, which had been funded by USAID.
7. Interview carried out with the former local focal point of the donor Embassy in March 2021, as part of the evaluation process.



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