

# Decolonizing Humanitarian Aid in Times of Coups

## Coloniality, Local Agency, and the Crisis of Intervention in Niger

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### Abstract

This study examines the intersections between humanitarian aid and coloniality in Niger, revealing how the 2023 coup both intensified existing operational challenges and exposed deeper structural tensions embedded in the country's humanitarian operations. Drawing on qualitative interviews with aid workers and experts, the study employs a decolonial framework to examine how humanitarian interventions continue to perpetuate neoliberal colonial standards, gendered hierarchies, and external humanitarian governance systems that undermine the local community's agency and autonomy. While the coup has affected humanitarian access routes, further heightened security risks, and imposed new bureaucratic restrictions on humanitarian operations, findings further demonstrate that these obstacles are inseparable from the longstanding postcolonial power relations embedded in the neo-liberal governance system, which the majority of the Nigerien populace has rejected, for its complicity in their continued socio-economic and political disempowerment. The study further demonstrates that many Nigeriens still perceive aid organizations as extensions of the global neoliberal colonial order, thereby undermining the credibility of their claims to neutrality and highlighting their perceived complicity in the population's current difficult socio-economic conditions. It argues that humanitarian effectiveness in coup-affected environments cannot meaningfully be achieved solely through operational adaptations. To address this, it is clear that the existing systems of neoliberal humanitarian operations require a comprehensive overhaul of how aid is delivered, with a focus on community agency, local knowledge, and collective decision-making. It also needs to break down the colonial structures that have shaped modern humanitarian governance in the country and most African countries. In view of the aforementioned, the study advocates for a decolonized humanitarian system that is structurally African, decolonized, and that can build trust between local populations and aid organizations, bolster resilience, and promote political stability in Niger and analogous contexts.

### Keywords

Coloniality of power, coup, decoloniality, humanitarian aid, Niger

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## Introduction

In recent decades, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced coups, civil and intrastate wars. Armed conflicts and episodes of political violence, such as coups, have become more recurring in this region than in other parts of the world (Youngs et al., 2024). At the same time, many other countries across the world, such as Ukraine and Palestine, continue to face various levels of humanitarian crises related to armed conflicts, which have had negative impacts on humanitarian operations in these regions (Doutchi et al., 2024). Being a landlocked state, Niger has since its inception been characterized by the enduring legacies of colonialism, underdevelopment, and recurrent political instabilities within its borders. Recent years have shown that the Niger and much of the territorial space within the Sahel sub-region have experienced an upsurge in coups and military political adventurism, which have disrupted most of the neoliberal governance structures and their socio-economic systems within society (Doukhan & Azani, 2021). It is crystal clear that most sudden and often violent disruptions in government and governance, such as those of a military nature in Niger, have consistently had profound consequences for the country's stability, as well as the effectiveness of humanitarian aid operations within the country (Youngs et al., 2024). The July 2023 coup that overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum further added to the region's political volatility. While Niger was long considered a stable country in which to implement humanitarian and development projects in the Sahel, the shift to military rule has undoubtedly led to increased scrutiny of humanitarian activities and a tightening of operational conditions.

Historically, Niger's political landscape has been characterized by a cycle of instability, with the country relying heavily on humanitarian aid for its survival and that of its population. Although emerging thoughts and findings, especially from scholars such as Cilas Kemedjio and Cecelia Lynch, have revealed that Africa has historically been a giver of aid rather than a receiver, particularly during the epochal periods of slavery and colonialism (Kemedjio & Lynch, 2024), this argument has become increasingly debated in contemporary times. In African scholarship on the politics of philanthropy and aid, Tade Aina's (2013) edited volume titled *Giving to Help, Helping to Give*, traces how African actors negotiate agency within the binary roles of donor and recipient simultaneously; the current dynamics now echo broader critiques. Such revelations necessitate a reassessment of the simplistic narratives that portray Africa as reliant on aid, as well as an examination of how aid politics intersect with local authority and dignity (Ampofo, 2024). However, recent events are now revealing the reliance of many African States on aid (OCHA, 2023).

The colonial powers, which drew arbitrary borders and instituted extractive administrative structures, upon independence, left behind weak state institutions and an uneven distribution of power agencies in Niger and many other colonized African States. This made these States heavily dependent on aid. Colonial legacy has contributed to the current underdevelopment through the facilitation, among other things, of the adoption of the liberal democratic model that has often proved incompatible with the indigenous African cultural and social realities.

The failure of Niger's neoliberal democratic experimentation has become more apparent in recent decades. The People's disenchantment has grown as a result of the neoliberal system's failure to address historical injustices and local needs. It becomes understandable not only as an administrative breakdown but also as the result of epistemic violence and governance systems that are still foreign to African conceptions of solidarity, sovereignty, and community when viewed through the prism of African philosophical agency and drawing on scholars like Frantz Fanon (1961) and Achille Mbembe (2001). As a result, coups have emerged not only as manifestations of local political power contestations but also as expressions of widespread discontentment with a system perceived as an extension of colonial and neoliberal legacies (Mamdani, 1996; Mbembe, 2001).

Recent reports from Niger now confirm that humanitarian organizations in Niger are facing complex operational environments, one in which the disruption of neoliberal state institutions, the reconfiguration of power relations, and the militarization of governance have disrupted established routes and mechanisms of aid delivery. Coupled with this, there were widespread reports that the coup not only created bureaucratic issues but also imposed stricter regulations, disrupting the flow

of essential services, including food, medicine, and shelter, to local communities (OCHA, 2023). The security of aid workers has also been a concern, as reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs indicate that several humanitarian convoys have been halted at military checkpoints. In contrast, others have faced direct threats from armed groups that exploit the political chaos (OCHA, 2023).

The reproduction of colonial power structures, however, has frequently been concealed by humanitarian aid organizations' insistence on the so-called "neutral" relief programs and humanitarian aid; some that promote purported Western "best practices" and "Western standards" in the former colonized territories as with Niger, while ignoring local care modalities and the agency of the people (Guillou, 2024). Interestingly, international NGOs often follow the same top-down procedures that colonial administrators had once employed, and postcolonial aid structures in Niger further reflect their French administrative legacies (Rodogno, 2021; CIHA, 2024).

Notwithstanding that, the challenges facing humanitarian operations in Niger must be understood within a theoretical framework that reflects current realities in the African context. First, to critically interrogate the continuation of colonial humanitarian aid structures, the study adopts a decolonial lens, broadly conceptualized as an approach that exposes how aid reproduces colonial power/knowledge regimes, drawing on Quijano (2000). For this study, the Decolonial paradigm is conceptualized as an African way of recovering knowledge that has been suppressed, while rethinking its own history in a manner consistent with its unique characteristics and realities. Invariably, the Decolonial approach is referred to here as a living developmental paradigm; one which foregrounds African development in its own history, knowledge, and way of life. What this implies is that, as Mignolo (2011) has rightly put it, the Decolonial approach calls for an epistemic disobedience and the courage to challenge, reject and reimagine the dominant neoliberal and Eurocentric ways of knowing. This, in addition, honors the experiences and knowledge of those who have historically been marginalized, regardless of their cultural, epistemic, social, and historical peculiarities (Tamale, 2020). A truly decolonial approach, therefore, prompts us to examine the profound historical and structural foundations of the aid system itself.

There is no gainsaying that Decolonial theory challenges the widespread structural and systemic authority of the Western liberal democracy and its neoliberal contentions while making a case that it remains a system whose implementations are not objective or universally applicable. Instead, they are rooted in colonial legacies that persistently shape global power relations and reproduce inequality within postcolonial contexts (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

In Niger, the repeated failures of liberal democratic governance — marked by corruption, poor economic management, and the inability to drive meaningful social progress - have fueled cycles of military coups. For many, these crises confirm the belief that liberal democracy is not an African solution but a Western import that has failed to take root in local realities.

This critique also extends to humanitarian aid. What is clear is that many of these international aid agencies now present themselves as impartial and benevolent. At the same time, most locals in Niger perceive them as extensions of Western political and economic influence. The lingering memory of colonial exploitation makes such skepticism understandable. In the same breadth, Decoloniality has become not just an academic idea but a call to rethink how power, knowledge, and assistance flow across the world, and to imagine development that truly reflects African voices and aspirations.

Local populations have come to view humanitarian workers with deep skepticism, interpreting their presence as an imposition of foreign values and policies that mirror the failed promises of liberal democracy. This mistrust is not unfounded; in many instances, aid organizations have been accused of exacerbating local tensions by aligning themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, with regimes that uphold the Western neoliberal agenda. In light of this, humanitarian aid now assumes a dual social identity: one as a benevolent force from the neoliberal West and secondly, as a vehicle for the continuation of neo-colonial praxis. Thus, the current military junta in Niger, which rejects the legitimacy of Western democratic ideals, further amplifies this sentiment by portraying international aid workers as covert agents of a system that has repeatedly failed the nation. Moreover, the politicization of aid has further contributed to heightened security risks.

Since 2023, violent attacks on humanitarian aid workers have increased spontaneously (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). An increasing pattern of hostility directed toward the workers now hinders the flow of humanitarian operations. The World Bank (2022) reports that the Human Development Index (HDI) of Niger has remained stagnant over the last decade. Political instability, corruption and the military's adventurism into the country's politics have accounted for most of the country's development challenges.

Furthermore, the frequency of coups in the region is associated with significant declines in foreign direct investment and public service delivery, resulting in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment and instability. Following the 2023 coup, the allocation of public finances for education and health in Niger fell by about 25% (World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, frequent coups in the Sahel have exacerbated a spiral of underdevelopment. Specifically, following Niger's July 2023 coup, key educational and health spending plummeted by as much as 25 per cent of public allocations (World Bank, 2022), thereby deeply undermining the State's capacity to respond to humanitarian crises. Drawing on Mbembe (2001), this collapse is not merely a crisis of governance. However, it reflects the postcolonial re-inscription of sovereign power that administers death and enacts biopolitical violence on civilian life. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) places this in the context of the "coloniality of power" that remains in postcolonial states, predisposing them to crises and external reliance. Feminist theory provides another important viewpoint. Awa Thiam (1978), Oyérónké Oyéwùmí (1997), and other African feminist academics have argued that assistance and development initiatives often reproduce colonial knowledge, undermining local sovereignty and gendered self-determination. Against the backdrop of their thesis, the Niger issue could be further understood within the intersecting logics of governance inadequacies, historical reliance, and liberal democracy failings, rather than an exception. Thus, the failure of liberal democracy with its neocolonial underbelly in Niger has had far-reaching consequences for the country's socioeconomic progress. The people have expressed dissatisfaction with neoliberal governance systems, which, in their view, account for most of their development struggles. The discontentment has created a haven for the making of an alternative political model, most notably the military-style governance that eschews the liberal democratic values of pluralism and individual rights in favor of a centralized, authoritarian approach. What this implies is that the current military junta at the helm of affairs in the country is now being perceived in the eyes of many of the locals not simply as a transient democratic aberration but as a needed potential corrective to the systemic failures of a liberal order that has consistently marginalized the needs and aspirations of the local population. Furthermore, many humanitarian workers operating within the country have been forced, among other things, to navigate a highly polarized religious and political landscape where their efforts are scrutinized not only for operational efficacy but also for their political implications.

This study aims to unpack how humanitarian aid is leveraged as a tool of (neo)colonial control, particularly in the Nigerien context. To achieve this, it employs a qualitative research design to examine the implications of the recent coup in Niger for humanitarian aid operations. The study relied on data obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants. These included three humanitarian aid workers in Niger, six academic experts with extensive research experience in humanitarian aid and international development, and 15 locals. The study relied on a purposive sampling strategy in order to ensure that participants selected have adequate knowledge of humanitarian operations in Niger, thus allowing for rich, context-specific insights into the challenges faced by aid organizations. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to humanitarian aid, political instability, and decoloniality in Niger.

## Humanitarian Aid and Political Instability

The literature on humanitarian aid delivery in politically unstable regions, particularly in countries undergoing coups, has undergone significant evolution in recent years. However, while existing studies have explored the broader complexities of humanitarian aid in conflict zones, they often fail to adequately address the unique implications of military coups and the decolonial dynamics shaping

the operational environment. In the extant literature, this is especially apparent. In Niger, recent postcolonial structures, political instability, and the failure of liberal democracy have compounded the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. In light of this, here, the study examines the current body of literature on humanitarian aid in politically unstable environments, with a focus on the specific challenges posed by coups, and integrates a decolonial critique to unpack the structural issues at play.

Decoloniality has undoubtedly and increasingly provided a prism for interrogating the imperial roots of humanitarianism. Rodogno (2021) has argued that most international aid has historically followed a pattern of colonial expansion whilst purportedly bringing aid to postcolonial Third World States. The Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa platform's "*Decolonizing Aid in Africa*" series has provided a compelling critique of humanitarian development aid as a re-entrenchment of the structural dependency between the global North and South. CIHA advocates for community-led humanitarian interventions, as it believes that a humanitarian operation excluding locals from its processes is inherently flawed (CIHA, 2024).

An area of concern in the existing literature lies with the nexus between political unrest and humanitarian aid delivery. Providing a holistic overview of the relationship between the two variables, Thomson (2020) opines that political unrest naturally disrupts humanitarian operations through restricted areas and access, security threats, and other military-imposed bureaucratic obstacles. Studies have primarily focused on the long-term conflict-driven instability rather than the immediate disruptions caused by military coups (Bennett et al., 2006; Thomson, 2020; Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024). These shifts disrupt not only governance structures but also humanitarian operations, especially when the new military junta enforces different policies and regulations, thus creating a volatile environment for aid workers.

## Decoloniality and Humanitarian Aid in Africa

The critique of the liberal democratic model is crucial in understanding why many Africans continue to view most humanitarian interventions by international organizations with suspicion and mistrust. Notwithstanding the official end of colonial rule on the continent of Africa, most humanitarian organizations are believed to be complicit in the continuation of the neocolonial and neoliberal objectives in Africa. Pertinent in light of the recent coup in Niger, it presents a situation where the military junta now openly criticizes and opposes the neocolonial and neoliberal systems masquerading as a democratic system (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Humanitarian aid delivery in Niger has been hindered by several structural and political issues over time, particularly since 2023, following the coup that led to the establishment of the current military junta. For example, the collapse of many governmental institutions during military control has disrupted existing governance mechanisms, creating a void that impedes cooperation among assistance providers. The significance of collaboration and coordination in humanitarian responses, as well as the examination of post-tsunami environments, does not entirely reflect how quickly political shifts, such as coups, can impair these systems (Bennett et al., 2006). In Niger, humanitarian organizations that traditionally depend on state frameworks must now operate in an environment marked by uncertainty and weakened institutional capacity.

Historical and social factors further compound this instability. It is clear that the current underdevelopment realities in Niger, as with most countries within the Sahel region, cannot be separated from the long shadow of colonial legacies and the continued dominance of Western models of governance even in the postcolonial period (Mignolo, 2011).

After Niger's formal independence, remnants of the colonial-style governance system, marked by rigid centralization and hierarchical decision-making, continue to remain firmly entrenched. Many of these colonial structures have left many citizens feeling marginalized and powerless in determining their own destinies. There has been a growing fatigue with the rhetoric of "development," as countless promises have failed to bring about tangible or lasting transformation in people's everyday lives.

As Mbembe (2001) observes, aid initiatives often mirror colonial patterns; solutions are designed elsewhere and imposed on local realities, leaving little room for genuine participation or ownership. Their presence cum aid workers in Niger has made the locals see many of the humanitarian projects with cautious optimism.

In his submission, Muggah (2013) further highlights similar dynamics in Haiti, where humanitarian aid has often been entangled with political motives, blurring the line between assistance and influence. This perception persists, namely, the understanding that aid organizations are often viewed as extensions of Western liberal ideals that have failed to deliver justice and equality. This association, as noted by Thomson (2020), can lead to the exclusion of specific organizations from local aid networks, as their presence is seen as reinforcing discredited political systems. Relying on Hilhorst and Jansen (2010), their study, on the one hand, provides a valuable lens for understanding these social tensions by conceptualizing humanitarian space not only as a politically contested arena but also as one shaped by the interactions and power struggles of multiple actors. While their framework captures the everyday politics of aid, it does not fully address how sudden political upheavals, such as military coups, reshape the humanitarian landscape. Whilst revealing the profoundly political nature of humanitarian action in postcolonial settings, these shifts not only disrupt operational logistics but also continue to redefine the inherent relationships among aid providers, the state, and local communities.

The collapse of democratic governance in Niger and the subsequent rise of a military junta create an environment where humanitarian aid operations become increasingly complex (Kanté et al., 2024). Humanitarian organizations, therefore, need to balance the need to remain neutral while operating within a context that is intensely volatile and delicate, where local populations hold significant suspicion toward their operations, and where any perceived alignment with the military junta could also be interpreted as complicity with the regime's objectives by the international community.

## The Role of Local Actors in Decolonizing Humanitarian Aid

The role of local actors in responding to political instability and humanitarian crises has also received significant attention in the literature. Collier and Hoeffler (2002) emphasize that local communities are often the first to respond during crises, providing immediate assistance before international aid organizations can mobilize. However, their work, which primarily focuses on civil war contexts, does not fully address how local actors adapt to sudden political changes such as coups. The local agencies in Niger are now beginning to develop ways to manage challenging relationships with the new military authority while providing essential services. Humanitarian interventions, for Hilhorst and Jansen (2010), must include local agency in order to be socio-politically responsive. Local players play an even more vital role in ensuring that help reaches people in most need in Niger, where locals have long felt alienated from the central government and international operations.

Ethical dilemmas present another significant concern for humanitarian organizations operating in politically unstable environments. The imperative must balance the complex moral landscape surrounding aid workers to assist, maintain neutrality and impartiality on the part of the aid workers. In Niger, the ethical challenges are magnified by the political dynamics surrounding the military coup. Humanitarian organizations are now facing intense pressure to demonstrate their neutrality while also dealing with the perception that they are neoliberal and remain aligned with Western-backed political regimes. This perception not only undermines their ability to operate effectively but also puts both aid workers and local communities at risk. As discussed by Muggah (2013), the politicization of the humanitarian processes is particularly acute in coup contexts where new political actors may seek to control the flow of aid to legitimize their rule or gain popular support.

Buttressing this position, Hosseini et al. (2023) provide insights into how humanitarian organizations have adapted to political turmoil. The implication here is that, while their analysis primarily focuses on longer-term political instability, it offers valuable insights into how humanitarian organizations can adapt their operations to sudden political shifts. In Niger, humanitarian organizations have

had to innovate by using digital platforms for aid distribution and by forging stronger partnerships with local actors. These adaptive strategies are crucial for maintaining the flow of humanitarian assistance despite the political instability triggered by the recent coup.

Thus, the existing literature provides a broad understanding of the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations operating in conflict and politically unstable regions. Even though liberal democracy frequently ignores the unique effects of coups and the lingering effects of colonialism, its failure adds to the complexity of humanitarian efforts.

## Decolonizing Humanitarian Aid: A Theoretical Statement

Since its inception alongside colonial conquests, humanitarian aid, especially from Western donors, has not merely functioned as a neutral gesture of relief but also as a continuation of imperial power dynamics. As Quijano (2000) argues, the *coloniality of power* persists beyond formal empire, structuring global hierarchies of race, knowledge, and authority that continue to shape institutions of intervention.

Humanitarian standards, whether influenced by the United Nations cluster system or the Sphere Minimum Standards, have frequently originated from Western viewpoints. They define what it means to be healthy, to live well, to treat people fairly, and to have just governance. Whereas many of the neoliberal standards hardly capture the lived realities of the people they are intended to assist. They can seem aloof and impersonal in places like Niger, ignoring the rich reservoir of indigenous knowledge that has long served as a guide for communities throughout the Sahel. Indeed, most Nigerien families have credibly built homes suited to their peculiar desert winds, shared food and water through intricate social networks, and healed one another with knowledge passed down through their elders. However, these ways of living, rooted in care, cooperation, and resilience, are often dismissed as informal or unscientific within humanitarian systems. International NGOs, bound by layers of paperwork and rigid procedures, often replicate the same top-down bureaucracies once imposed by colonial administrations. The end effect is a kind of assistance that speaks the language of compassion but struggles to pay attention and recognize the people it is meant to assist as masters of their own survival. Furthermore, the neoliberal humanitarian system has significantly downplayed Nigerian communities' lived wisdom and their adaptive coping techniques, which have evolved over generations (Rodogno, 2021). This disparity is criticized by Walter Mignolo (2011) as the coloniality of knowledge, or the ongoing preference for Western ways of knowing over alternative worldviews.

Reacting further, Minolo (2011) further made a case for epistemic disobedience; that is, a conscious act of breaking away from dominant knowledge systems to make room for subaltern voices. Humanitarian standards are basically shaped by the Sphere Minimum Standards or the United Nations cluster system, often emerging from Western perspectives that define what it means to live well, to be healthy, or to be governed justly. Though these frameworks claim universality, they rarely reflect the lived realities of the people they aim to serve. For generations, Nigerien families have built homes that are suited to the desert winds, shared food and water through intricate social networks, and healed one another with knowledge passed down through their elders from one generation to the next. In places like Niger, the neoliberal humanitarian systems in Africa, as with most developing worlds, often overlook the deep well of local wisdom and agency that has guided African communities across the Sahel for centuries.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres have deepened this position. African communities are often portrayed as helpless recipients of charity, rather than as robust agents of their own existence (Ngwenya & Naude, 2016). This tale is brought to life in Niger through evocative images of charity missions, dust-covered faces, empty bowls held out in desperation, and moms with sorrowful eyes. While such pictures are intended to elicit compassion, they often overshadow the more genuine, quieter tale, which is inscribed in the daily acts of resilience that bind communities together.

The ancient and decolonial methods of addressing many of the communities' health, social and humanitarian challenges have always been part and parcel of the people's being. These tested and effective indigenous systems rarely make it into glossy reports or global headlines, yet they reveal a profound, unshakeable humanitarian system.

Decolonial thinkers such as Achille Mbembe (2001) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) remind us that postcolonial states frequently inherit the logic of colonial governance. Rabiou et al. (2024) aver that these are systems rooted in a long history of neoliberal order where relief and authority are intertwined. Feminist decolonial scholars add another vital dimension to this critique. Sylvia Tamale (2020) argues that African women are too often depicted as passive beneficiaries of aid, their leadership and knowledge erased by gendered colonial hierarchies. Furthermore, Khursheed (2022) exposed how microcredit schemes, cash transfers or medical kit distributions often reinforce stereotypes rather than empowering women through their own community-based governance systems.

Women's associations in Niger have long played crucial roles in managing water resources, mediating disputes, and sustaining social cohesion. However, mainstream Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) and protection programs rarely consult them, perpetuating the colonial assumption that women's voices require external validation (Dei, 2014; Rabiou et al., 2024).

What is crystal clear is that these realities have shown that humanitarian aid in postcolonial Niger, especially in the post-2023 coup times, still moves within old and rigid hierarchies of knowledge, power, and gender that echo the very colonial systems it promises to undo. The attendant consequence is that it misses the essence cum strength of the Nigerien being; the wisdom of its elders, the ingenuity of women, the determination of youth, and the quiet strength that has always guided its communities through thick and thin. Genuine compassion thus begins not with instruction, but with listening to voices that have never been silent, only unheard.

Undoubtedly, decolonizing aid would, therefore, require more than localized participation. It would demand a reconfiguration of who counts as knowledge, who has their governance structures recognized, and whose voices set the terms of aid or of humanitarian interventions.

## The Impact of Political Instability in Niger

One of the key themes that emerges from the interviews is the disruption of aid operations and the inaccessibility of vulnerable populations to humanitarian organizations. Respondents universally agree that the coup has significantly disrupted the delivery of humanitarian assistance, with many citing increased challenges in reaching the most vulnerable populations. The political instability and military takeover in Niger have introduced numerous barriers to humanitarian aid, including administrative delays, restricted movement, and heightened security risks. These factors have collectively hindered the effectiveness of humanitarian agencies in the region.

An aid worker in Niger elaborated on the dynamics, stating:

The military takeover has made it extremely difficult for us to access certain areas. We face constant roadblocks, and our work is often delayed due to the new bureaucratic hurdles set by the military (Aid worker, The International Rescue Committee, Niger, 2024).

This statement aligns with Muggah's (2013) thesis that political instability, such as coups, often results in logistical disruptions, heightened operational costs, and delays in aid delivery, which, in most cases, can undermine the overall effectiveness of humanitarian operations. This suggests that the military junta's bureaucratic imposition, requiring all humanitarian organizations operating in the country to be cleared and to seek approval from the military before embarking on any aid operation, has directly affected the country's humanitarian space. While the military government may not be solely responsible for the new operational challenges, the disruptions that typically accompany sudden military takeovers and the erosion of existing democratic structures may be partly to blame.

As another respondent has reflected, *I am not sure the ICRC and MSF are finding their job easy in this region*, pointing to the strained capacities of these major humanitarian actors in the wake of the coup. Official reports from MSF and ICRC on their operations further corroborate these claims (MSF, 2023). For instance, MSF reported that it has faced significant challenges in providing medical assistance to vulnerable communities due to frequent clashes between government troops and terrorists, and curfews imposed by the military hierarchy in some territories, all of which have significantly delayed the delivery of urgent medical interventions to vulnerable communities (MSF, 2023). Similarly, the ICRC has reported several disruptions to its humanitarian operations due to limited access to most key vulnerable communities affected by violent conflict (ICRC, 2023; OCHA, 2023). These operational barriers are not merely the result of security challenges but are also a manifestation of the broader geopolitical and decolonial dynamics at play. The reservation of the incumbent military regime toward the operations of the neoliberal humanitarian organization further demonstrates the broader picture of the mistrust that most postcolonial African military regimes harbor toward most neoliberal humanitarian organizations. This explains why the current military administration in the country is averse to the posturing of many of the neoliberal agencies, of which the humanitarian organization is a key component. This further reinforced why many locals continue to see many of the neoliberal humanitarian organizations as agents of foreign political agendas and of the neo-colonial liberal democratic order that has, over time, enriched a few members of the internal political class over the masses.

The suspicion of the locals is basically rooted in the legacies of colonialism; structures where external interventions were often seen as serving the interests of former colonial powers rather than addressing local needs and aspirations. As one participant, resident in Maradi town in Niger, noted in the *Fulfude* language:

*tawtoreede gollotoobe ballondiral hakkunde leydeele wontii politik no feewi. Yimbe doo njiyataa be ko lanndaaji dī ngonaa laamuyankooji; be njiytira ko gollotoobe laamuui janani* (Transcribed in English as: the presence of international aid workers has become highly politicized. People here do not see them as neutral parties; they are seen as agents of foreign powers).

What the above narration suggests is that, within postcolonial discourse, humanitarian aid in Niger and most African communities is not often neutral but a tool of neocolonial control, perpetuating unequal power dynamics between donor nations and recipient States (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). It further demonstrates that the failures of aid organizations to navigate the complex political landscape in Niger are not only due to logistical and security challenges but also to the political and cultural alienation of local populations, stemming from the long-standing legacy of colonialism, mistrust and suspicion the locals hold toward them.

## Conclusion

We can infer from this study that the neoliberal humanitarian aid operations in Niger cannot be fully understood without situating them within the broader context of the postcolonial governance failures and the enduring coloniality embedded within the global aid architectures. It is crystal clear here that the coup that took place in 2023 in Niger has, within the context of humanitarian operations. Again, it has disrupted the logistical channels and operational routines and further exposed the long-standing fractures in the relationship between external humanitarian actors and local populations. This study has further revealed that most neoliberal humanitarian organizations operating in Niger's militarized political terrain are now confronted with severe bureaucratic, security, and structural challenges that lie at the heart of their engagements with the communities they serve.

The deep social mistrust and suspicion that the locals and the military regime hold toward many neoliberal organizations further complicates and highlights why most humanitarian organizations and their operations are received with cautious optimism by the locals. These insights reinforce the decolonial critiques that call for dismantling hierarchical aid models that privilege external

expertise while marginalizing indigenous agency. Hence, the study presents an opportunity to observe that the Nigerien experience has shown that, for humanitarian operations to be effective in politically volatile environments, such as during times of coups, more than operational adaptation is required. It necessitates a fundamental transformation of the humanitarian logic and informs a genuinely decolonized humanitarian practice; one that is rooted in epistemic plurality, local ownership, and relational trust, and offers the most viable path toward sustainable assistance and political stability. In this sense, the crisis in Niger serves as both a warning and an opportunity to reimagine humanitarianism beyond its colonial legacies.

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