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## The Politics of Aid and Poverty Reduction in Africa: A Conceptual Proposal and the Case of Mali

Bergamaschi, Isaline

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Centre for  
**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

**Isaline Bergamaschi**

# **The Politics of Aid and Poverty Reduction in Africa: A Conceptual Proposal and the Case of Mali**

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47059 Duisburg  
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Tel: +49 (0)203 29861-100  
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*Isaline Bergamaschi*

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## **Abstract**

How can we conceptualise the politics of aid and account for the effects of internationally-driven poverty reduction policies in the Global South? This Working Paper offers a conceptual framework that goes beyond two common assumptions in the academic literature and the activist milieu: on the one hand, the idea that one-size-fits-all international recommendations and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are imposed on recipient governments; on the other hand, the idea promoted by the World Bank and shared by most donors that PRSPs are efficient when 'owned' by the recipient government. To do so, the Working Paper takes the case of Mali in the 2000s and presents the uses and trajectories of PRSPs in this West African country. The Working Paper distances itself from the two notions of imposition and 'ownership' and takes recipient agency seriously. To investigate the politics of aid and poverty reduction in aid-dependent countries, it offers an analytical framework which borrows from the notion of 'appropriation'. It argues that the PRSPs in Mali have been successfully appropriated by public actors, i.e. political leaders, public servants and civil society representatives. This Working Paper shows how, over one decade, the PRSP has shifted from being a 'World Bank thing', i.e. a mere conditionality to comply with, to being treated by public actors as the 'reference framework'. This has happened through modalities and processes of appropriation which differed from the scenario initially envisaged by the World Bank but have ensured that the PRSP has become truly Malian, i.e. embedded in the country's socio-political fabric.

## **Keywords**

*Politics of aid, aid dependency, poverty reduction, ownership, appropriation, crisis, Mali, international political economy, development studies, development anthropology, public policy and policy tools*

## **Author**

*Isaline Bergamaschi*, Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) / REPI.

# The Politics of Aid and Poverty Reduction in Africa: A Conceptual Proposal and the Case of Mali

Isaline Bergamaschi

## 1 Introduction

The 'post-Washington consensus' refers to the arguably new international development paradigm proposed by the international financial institutions (IFIs) after their structural adjustment programmes generated mixed outcomes and harsh criticisms from the 1990s<sup>1</sup> onwards. It is composed of the principle of *ownership* – understood as *commitment* to adjustment and reform (Johnson and Wasty 1993: 10–11)<sup>2</sup> and *poverty reduction*, a doctrine that considers more thoroughly a number of growth factors such as human capital, innovation and public goods. Economic restructuring is accompanied by the provision of services (basic education and healthcare), social safety nets (Fine, Lapavistas, and Pincus 2001), good governance (Leys 2005: 120–1)<sup>3</sup> and increased participation of civil society organisations. These principles have guided public policy in many developing countries – especially in aid-dependent sub-Saharan Africa – in the last fifteen years, together with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted under the auspices of the United Nations in 2000, which aimed to cut the world's extreme poverty by half by 2015 (Bergamaschi 2011b: 136–7).

The implementation of the post-Washington consensus in developing countries has materialised through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), i.e. pluri-annual national plans geared towards poverty reduction and, in many cases, the achievement of the MDGs. Designing a PRSP became a condition of eligibility for the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC) in 1999 and hence a 'new conditionality' of aid (Gould 2005).

As shown in the MDG Report 2014, the ambitious MDGs have not been met in sub-Saharan Africa despite massive international mobilisation. This is due to factors and shocks related to the international environment and political economy, the relevance and limits of the model pursued, and the local conditions for its

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<sup>1</sup> See, amongst others, Danaher (1994); Wysham, Arruda, and Cavanagh (1994); Chossudovsky (1997).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there has been a debate within these organisations about the actual meaning of ownership. See Boughton and Mourmouras (2002).

<sup>3</sup> The intention behind the MDGs was to go beyond economic recommendations, as shown by Vandemoortele (2011).

implementation. To understand the latter aspect, this Working Paper offers an analytical framework to study the trajectories, uses and effects of PRSPs in Mali. Such a critical assessment is relevant because a post-2015 agenda has been adopted<sup>4</sup> at the international level and because Mali was long considered a 'donor darling' until it plunged into a deep, multidimensional crisis in 2012.

The dominant policy documents and academic literature dealing with the post-Washington agenda have pointed to its inherent weaknesses or, alternatively, its insufficient implementation. Failure has mainly been attributed to the one-size-fits-all character of PRSPs and/or lack of local 'ownership'. Contrary to these approaches, the Working Paper takes recipient agency seriously. It builds on my previous work to argue that the PRSPs in Mali have been 'reworked locally' (Bergamaschi 2011a and 2011b) and develops a new framework to highlight how it was successfully *appropriated* by public actors, i.e. political leaders, public servants and civil society representatives, including in the light of the recent political crisis (since 2012). The Working Paper shows how, over the past decade, the PRSP has shifted from being a 'World Bank thing'<sup>5</sup>, i.e. a mere conditionality to comply with for the country to gain access to debt relief, to being treated by public actors in Mali as the 'reference framework'<sup>6</sup>. This has happened through modalities which differed from what the World Bank initially envisaged, but has ensured that the PRSP has become truly Malian.

The Working Paper draws on my doctoral thesis (Bergamaschi 2011a), extensive empirical material, which includes six months of fieldwork and participant observation carried out as an intern at the PRSP Unit<sup>7</sup> in Mali's capital city Bamako in 2007 and 2008, three additional field trips in 2013 and 2014 (two months in total), a close analysis of policy documents and about 200 interviews with practitioners undertaken in Bamako, Paris, Brussels and Washington D.C. between 2007 and 2014.

The first section reviews the existing literature on the politics of aid, the post-Washington consensus and the effects of PRSPs in aid-dependent countries and presents my analytical framework and contribution to the academic debate. In order to illustrate the argument, Section 2 exposes the processes of appropriation to which the PRSPs were subject in Mali between 2002 and 2015. The conclusion outlines some reflections about the past and future of appropriation, aid and international intervention in Mali.

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<sup>4</sup> A national report on the post-2015 development agenda was adopted in Bamako in May 2013. See: République du Mali, Ministère de l'Economie, des finances et du budget, cellule technique CSLP 2013.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase was used in several interviews with agents of the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the PRSP Unit between 2007 and 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Technical assistant, PRSP Unit, interview with the author, Bamako, March 2014.

<sup>7</sup> The Unit is an administrative entity attached to Mali's Ministry of Economy and Finance and in charge of drafting and supervising the PRSP. For a complete description of the Unit, its functions, limitations and legitimacy deficit in the institutional apparatus, see Bergamaschi (2014).

## 2 The Conceptual Framework: From 'Ownership' to Appropriation

The conceptual framework presented in this Working Paper builds on the premise that because they are fuzzy and apparently neutral, development buzzwords and objectives like the MDGs are mobilising metaphors that throw a veil over ideological differences during negotiations and facilitate consensus in multilateral negotiations and arenas such as the UN (Mosse 2005: 230). It also argues that the effects of development-related 'global prescriptions' (Dezalay and Garth 2002) are better observed and understood when they are implemented in developing countries, where they take different paths shaped by local configurations of power and produce contrasted and eminently political results. This Working Paper explains how this takes place in practice and offers a conceptual framework to analyse the 'politics of aid' (Whitfield 2008) and poverty reduction in sub-Saharan African countries.

Policy and scholarly debates about the post-Washington consensus have so far been dominated by two trends. The first, led by heterodox economists, has offered a critical assessment of the PRSPs. Inspired by Marxist or dependency theories, they underline that the poverty reduction paradigm is exploitative, paternalistic and imposed on developing countries through conditionalities and broader schemes of the international political economy. According to these economists, poverty reduction as a development paradigm is unable to foster growth and industrialisation and achieve real socioeconomic development (see Cammack 2004; Chang 2006; Taylor 2003: 310; Fine et al. 2001; Saith 2006). By combining neoliberal policies with charity, it is irrelevant and even detrimental to the economies and societies in the Global South.

In Mali, similar positions have been adopted by the far-left *Parti pour la Solidarité Africaine, la Démocratie et l'Indépendance* led by Oumar Mariko and a member of the global justice movement, Aminata Dramane Traoré (Traoré 1999 and 2014)<sup>8</sup>. Both are major critics of neoliberal policies, of Mali's dependency on international creditors and of the West more broadly. From a different perspective, critical social scientist Hamidou Magassa (2008: 11) called poverty reduction a 'deadlock', a political and intellectual 'capitulation' in the long history of development thinking and policies, a denial of autochthonous understandings and experiences of poverty (and its local solutions) and an 'insult to Man and God alike'.

The second approach adopts 'ownership' as a trigger for measuring the implementation of the post-Washington consensus. Analysts have pointed to the 'gap' between IFI promises of local leadership of the process and their real achievements regarding civil society participation and government leadership and control of decision-making and the implementation of policies (Raffinot 2010; Dante et al. 2005: 16). By taking the notion of ownership as a marker, however, they fail to distance themselves from IFI's ontological assumptions and institutional interests as the notion of 'ownership' initially comes from IFIs.

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<sup>8</sup> A detailed biographical description of Aminata Dramane Traoré is provided by Siméant (2014).



Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s, borrowing governments implemented Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) unevenly, superficially or selectively because their policy recommendations and the conditionalities attached to financial relief were unrealistic and could generate instability and protest, thus eroding the social legitimacy and basis of regimes, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Williams 2006: 10). In the context of severe 'aid fatigue' in the late 1990s, donors concluded that if the financial arm can encourage – or compel – recipient authorities to accept a certain number of reforms through conditionalities, it cannot buy adherence and guarantee implementation. For example, in a study carried out in 1998 by the London-based Overseas Development Institute, Tony Killick (1998: 3) tackled the following question: 'What policy change are we [donors] buying with this money?', and identified two explanatory factors for the failure of SAPs: 'external shocks' (the international environment, climatic conditions, etc.) and the 'lack of will' of recipient governments. Building on Derick Brinkerhoff's analysis, the author concludes that the pressure exerted by donors cannot replace 'local leadership'<sup>9</sup>.

As IFIs were called into question and urged to change, the notion of 'ownership' acted as a 'legitimacy fix' for them. It helped reconcile the need to reform IFI practices while protecting what the World Bank staff call 'sound', 'good policies' (Woods 2006: 167) and their 'professional standards of excellence' (Gulrajani in Stone and Wright 2007: 52), driven by the need to facilitate reforms and to take into account national specificities while ensuring the universality and neutrality of IFI programmes<sup>10</sup>.

The term 'ownership' initially comes from the fields of law (it means property) and management studies, where it refers to a set of values and co-optation techniques used to control and motivate employees in firms, increase their personal commitment to corporate objectives and enhance their productivity (Cooke 2003). The term loses some of its clarity when imported into the field of aid (Williams 2006: 10), but is given a specific meaning for IFIs, highlighted in a World Bank discussion paper:

*The defining quality of ownership is a country's acceptance without coercion of full responsibility for the outcome of a program and therefore rationally insisting on acting in self-interest to maximize the expected utility of its citizens obtained from the program* (Johnson 2005: 5).

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<sup>9</sup> 'No amount of external donor pressure or resources, by themselves, can produce sustained reform. It takes ownership, both of the policy change to be implemented and of any capacity-building efforts intended to enhance implementation (...) Without policy "champions" who are willing and able to serve as leaders for change, reform is not possible. Fundamentally, indigenous leadership is essential for sustainable policy implementation' (Killick 1998: 90–1).

<sup>10</sup> 'Progress in implementation has been stronger, where governments have "owned" the program and hence were committed to carrying it through (...) The cost of failure is too great (...) to ignore the potential contribution of a better understanding of the political economy of adjustment' (Johnson and Wasty 1993: 10–11).

Following an approach inspired by the agency theory<sup>11</sup>, the goal for IFIs is to 'align' the preferences and interests of recipient governments in developing countries to the post-Washington consensus and make them embrace poverty reduction objectives, i.e. to make them their own:

*The principal (here, the donor) must rely on the assisted country (the agent) to pursue certain objectives; in a context of imperfect information and in the absence of an efficient surveillance mechanism, the agent has the possibility to follow their own interest rather than the principal's and the principal's interest is that the agent adopts the same objectives as theirs (Guillaumont et al. 2004).*

In the process, African governments do not get a free hand to implement their preferred policies (Whitfield 2008: 6–7). 'Ownership' must express itself within the limits of the 'partnership' established with donors and despite their massive presence and constant interference ('donorship' in the words of Mosse and Lewis 2005: 85 and 105), as illustrated in a report produced by the G24:

*If a program is going to be supported by outsiders – in particular by powerful creditors – then the outsiders must be convinced of the sustainability of the economic policies before they would give their support (Johnson 2005: 8).*

The shift from adjustment to 'ownership' has not implied a shift of power from Washington D.C. to African capital cities or a reaffirmation of the sovereignty and right to auto-determination of governments in the Global South. On the contrary, the notion can contribute to fuelling and institutionalising their loss of sovereignty, which was aggravated after the end of the Cold War. The sovereignty of African states in particular is conditioned to their capacity to ensure economic development and the well-being of their populations. The international community attributes itself the right to be partially in charge of economic development in these countries through numerous and multi-faceted interventions (Fraser 2006). Therefore, the challenge for the governments of developing countries is really to 'maximise ownership within the constraining contours of conditionalities' (Kahn and Sharma 2003: 235).

When criticised for imposing one-size-fits-all models and policies and for causing breaches of sovereignty in the Global South, IFIs promise that programmes would no longer be elaborated in Washington D.C. but in developing countries. The role of international donors remains essential, but IFIs claim to shift from a coercive role to increasing their influence to make sure that the post-Washington consensus is internalised as soon as possible (OED 1986: iv, quoted in Johnson and Wasty 1993: 1). Political leaders in developing countries are said to be 'in the driver's seat' and expected to have or develop the vision, faith and determination needed to engage in in-depth reforms of the economy and the state. They must proactively support

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<sup>11</sup> For an example of how the agency theory was applied to aid relationships, see Martens (2005).

and take responsibility for the programmes, from their elaboration to their full implementation (Johnson 2005: 2 and 7–8; Khan and Sharma 2003: 235) and manage aid resources and relationships with donors in an efficient way<sup>12</sup>. They must also organise and supervise the participation of civil society organisations and private stakeholders to avoid opposition and build a consensus that is as large as possible in order to guarantee the success and sustainability of programmes (Taylor 2003: 465; Johnson 2005: 4–5; Khan and Sharma 2003: 234; Moore 2006: 467; Stiglitz 1998).

However, I have shown elsewhere (Bergamaschi 2011a and 2011b) that there is no consensus about the correct translation, meaning and implications of the term ‘ownership’ in aid-recipient countries specifically amongst the development actors present in Mali. Most of the expatriate staff of aid agencies are French speakers. For the majority of Malian civil servants, their native language is Bambara and their working language is French. Speaking English is very uncommon in Mali. Therefore, key players only have a partial understanding of concepts generated in English by IFIs. In French, ‘ownership’ is literally translated as ‘property right’ (*droit de propriété*) or ‘possession’ (*possession*), but since being a ‘*propriétaire*’ of policies makes no sense in French, the term was translated as *appropriation* by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This is highly ambiguous since appropriation means ‘becoming the owner of something’ or ‘making something one’s own’ (in the sense of acquisition) as well as ‘making something appropriate for one’s use’ in the sense of adaptation (*Le Petit Robert* 2011) (Bergamaschi 2011b).

On the whole, the key players interviewed in Bamako dislike this translation on the grounds that ‘it implies that Mali must internalise what comes from outside.’<sup>13</sup> Mali’s Federation of NGOs (*Fédération des Collectifs d’ONG — FECONG*) suggested that ownership should be translated into the more political notion of ‘self-determination’. When I asked some interviewees how to translate ‘ownership’ in Bambara, their answers varied between ‘*tigiya talí*, which means ‘to get hold of’, and ‘*ka ki yèrè tayé*, which means ‘taking something as if it belongs to you’<sup>14</sup> (Bergamaschi 2011a and 2011b).

The history of ‘ownership’ shows that it is a normative, politically-driven term used by IFIs to defend specific visions and interests regarding aid, policy-making and development in the Global South. As such, the notion is analytically weak and can only be understood through the competing uses and political struggles it generates, the effects it produces and its implications for policy-making. It should not be used uncritically in academic debates as it does not necessarily capture the

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<sup>12</sup> ‘There has to be a shift away from the previous relatively passive mind-set (...) towards active leadership in the development of “homegrown” development programs. Developing countries (...) have to develop clearer views as to precisely what forms of external support they require (...), based on clearly defined national goals and an exhaustive mobilization of national capacities and resources’ (Helleiner 2000: 2–3).

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted by the author at the French Embassy in Mali, Bamako, November 2007.

<sup>14</sup> These two proposals were made, respectively, by Hamidou Magassa (PhD in ethno-linguistics and a researcher at SERNESP), and a younger economist who was part of the IMF’s representation in Bamako. Their understandings of the concept appear to have been informed by their age difference and their position within Mali’s aid community.

logics, processes and effects of aid recommendations and resources in developing countries. This is why this Working Paper calls for the substitution of the notion of ownership with an alternative analytical framework and, in particular, the notion of 'appropriation' (Bergamaschi 2011a), not as a French translation for ownership (as the OECD uses it), but in the sense defined by the social sciences.

Appropriation comes from anthropology. The works of Michel de Certeau (1980) reveal how consumers *appropriate* objects, goods and technological tools through daily, mundane and tactical arrangements. In anthropology, any development project is regarded as a 'strategic arena' (Olivier de Sardan 1995: 20–1) and a 'battlefield for control' that each stakeholder tries to master in its own way (Mosse 2005: 188). Aid 'beneficiaries' are never passive and can act differently from donors' expectations. For instance, Malian anthropologist Birama Diakon (2006) has shown how new agricultural techniques introduced by French colonisers at the Office du Niger in the early twentieth century led to creative practices: for example, the cart's shape and functioning were modified to fit people's interests, logics and constraints (climate, soil, needs, social structure, etc.). This, the author argues, is not due to recipient incapacity, conservatism, lack of understanding or bad will, nor is it an anomaly, but a normal process through which individual or collective actors, intentionally or not, divert development goals and instruments. In this Working Paper, appropriation is not applied to delimited development projects or technologies (as in the aforementioned anthropological works), but to macro-policies like the PRSPs.

In the field of African studies, Richard Banégas (2003) used the phrase 'successive appropriation' to characterise the trajectories of democratisation in Benin and its deviations from the linear process described by prescriptive models of democratic transition. Aurélie Latourès (2008) studied the reception and peculiar uses – the appropriation – of social causes and public policy tools related to the fight against genital mutilation in Mali and Kenya. Importantly, too, 'appropriation' was identified by Jean-François Bayart (1999) as one modality of Africa's insertion into the world. In his 'grammar of extraversion', the author lists six modalities through which the continent has entered globalisation and managed dependency historically: coercion (use of physical force and violence); ruse and trickery; escapism (e.g. migrations); mediation between external powers and local authorities; appropriation, i.e. the adoption of practices and customs of the West; and finally, rejection, opposition or resistance. This analytical typology, which focuses primarily on culture, religion, food, clothing and war, is adopted here and applied to macroeconomic policies and the policy recommendations promoted by aid and in particular IFIs in Mali through the conditionalities and other interventions, such as so-called 'policy-making', 'capacity-building' or technical assistance. My analysis also builds extensively on the political economy works by Béatrice Hibou, which deal with the appropriation of aid and state formation in North Africa, and seek to analyse not the effects of economic policies and reforms on poverty levels *per se*, but their articulation with, and influence on, domestic politics and the reproduction of authoritarian power (Hibou 2004: 5).

Finally, the appropriation and Malianisation of the World Bank's recommendations are analysed here through the lens of a public policy tool: the PRSPs. Following the work by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004: 13–17), my

observations approach the PRSPs as policy instruments, i.e. 'both a technical and social tool' that carry a specific conception of, and organise the relationships between, public institutions and their beneficiaries. They are the tools through which power materialises and is exercised concretely. In this case, the PRSPs entail and promote a certain conception of 'ownership' and poverty reduction and structure the relationships between international donors, the government and civil society organisations in Mali. In many ways, then, our approach follows Goran Hyden's invitation to consider development partners as 'part of a political process in which the issues of development and politics are closely interwoven' (Hyden 2008) and Jeremy Gould and Julia Ojanan's early analysis of how aid's globalised and 'depoliticised mode of technocratic governance' re-moulds the way 'politics is played out' in developing countries (Gould 2005; Gould and Ojanan 2003: 7).

By doing so, my conceptual proposal aims to complement the existing literature on the politics of aid and the post-Washington consensus in sub-Saharan Africa. Some have studied aid, and specifically structural adjustment programmes, as the result of a negotiation between actors, sometimes using game theory – at the expense of a critical understanding of the stakes at play and their political meaning and implications (Mosely et al. 1991). *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors*, edited by Lindsay Whitfield (2008) highlighted the strategies adopted by African governments to 'deal with donors' and exert as much control as possible over the ways aid resources are used. The volume adopts a comparative approach to the strategies deployed by African governments and their degree of control over policies. It lists the explaining factors for the variation and differences observed, including the resources mobilised to gain autonomy vis-à-vis donors (vision of development, ideology, domestic support or opposition).

Despite its important contribution to the debate, I argue that this volume has two main limitations. The case studies focus on the objectives and strategies of different African governments and distinguish between those which exert 'strong', 'medium' or 'weak' control over policies (Whitfield 2008: 331). However, in contexts of high aid dependency and co-production of public policies between international and national actors, this distinction is not fully convincing and operational in practice. Most of the time, macroeconomic frameworks, policy measures and reforms result from constant interactions between Malian public servants and international experts (donor representatives, consultants, technical assistants). They are co-produced and 'digested' by them in a way which makes it difficult to draw a clear line between actors and identify which specific actor initiated any given project or programme, policy or reform (Bergamaschi 2011a). Furthermore, the distinction between the government on one side and donors on the other is not always the most relevant as some ministries and donors (e.g. the IMF and the Ministry of Finance) share, and join forces around, common ideas, priorities and professional identities.

On the other hand, the idea of 'control' used by contributors in *The Politics of Aid* gives more importance to the phase when public policies are formulated and elaborated than to the phase of their implementation. This is limitative, since African governments have learnt over the decades to accept and approve international recommendations formally and then fail to implement them. Tactics and tricks to avoid the costs associated with implementation and the impact of

conditionalities are classified as indicators of 'weak control' (as compared to opposing donor prescriptions and searching for autonomous policy-making) and are thus underestimated in the volume. However, some works on domination and the art of resistance in other contexts (slavery, forced labour) have shown that there is no separation, but rather a continuum, between 'mere gestures' and 'real resistance'. Symbolic or material, implicit or not, direct (strikes, marches, riots) or indirect (irony, popular cultural products), differentiated forms of protest are part of the same dynamic: they complement one another and are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory and exclusive (Scott 1992: 200 and 217). The notion of appropriation is interesting to the extent that it focuses on the implementation phase and on the deviations, creative uses and unintended effects that it inevitably leads to – despite the policy statements and formal commitments produced by recipient governments.

The following section illustrates the argument by explaining how the PRSP as a policy tool has been increasingly appropriated by public actors in Mali, and lists several of the processes of appropriation that have been at play with the different versions of the PRSPs in Mali since 2002.

### 3 Processes of Appropriation and the Many Lives of PRSPs in Mali

Mali applied to the HIPC Initiative in 1999 and was declared eligible the following year. The first PRSP (2002–2006) was adopted in May 2002, i.e. at the end of Alpha Oumar Konaré's term as President. The second PRSP was adopted for the period 2007–2011, and a third PRSP (2012–2017) is currently being implemented.

The agents involved in designing and evaluating the first PRSP often describe it as an 'iterative' process and emphasise the 'improvements' made since 2002 regarding context analysis and local ownership. Several weaknesses – which are not specific to Mali – remain, such as lack of prioritisation, the insufficient link with the national budget, and absence of parliamentary control<sup>15</sup>. However, the PRSP is now part of the planning routine and is a central element of national public policy-making. The notions of ownership or *institutionalisation* (Gulrajani 2007; for a country case study, see the study led by the London-based Overseas Development Institute/David Booth 2001) cannot fully account for this and grasp the uses of the PRSPs as their promoters assume that the PRSPs' greater conformity to the World Bank project is desirable and/or inevitable.

Instead, I argue that the PRSP as a policy tool has been *appropriated* by public actors. In 2013, a donor background document noted that the PRSP is a 'live

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<sup>15</sup> According to the international consultant who supported the process of drafting the third-generation PRSP, the case of Mali stands in contrast to the cases of other countries of the region with majority rule, where Parliament is tasked by the president to play a more prominent – if not autonomous or critical – role in the strategy's adoption and monitoring. Interview, Paris, 23.11.2012.

document”<sup>16</sup>. Drawing on this metaphor, the following section describes the many lives of the PRSPs, which have contributed to its non-linear, uncertain diffusion and successive appropriation in Mali. This section shows how the successive versions of the document have been increasingly ‘Malianised’ by national public actors: for each PRSP, one modality of appropriation is explained in detail: firstly (i) insertion, then (ii) adaptation and more recently, (iii) sacralisation.

It is important to note that the separation between the three versions of the PRSP is not as strict as it may seem. The chronological path corresponds to specific developments and is emphasised here to facilitate understanding. In the same vein, the different modalities of appropriation mentioned below are dominant in a certain period of time but are by no means mutually exclusive.

### *The First PRSP: Insertion into National Bureaucracy and Politics*

Because it stemmed out of conditionality for access to the HIPC initiative, the first PRSP in Mali was, overall, considered as a ‘World Bank thing’ which ought to be inserted into the country’s bureaucracy and politics.

The *Cadre Stratégique de Lutte contre la Pauvreté* was elaborated hastily by two young economists trained in France under the supervision of a former high-ranking official of the Planning Ministry (today’s PRSP Unit coordinator). They worked under considerable pressure and to strict deadlines. The two subsequent PRSPs (2007–2011 and 2012–2017) were elaborated by the PRSP Unit, an administrative entity created to write and monitor the PRSP. Because IFIs were reluctant to locate it at the Ministry of Planning, which they associate with socialist planning, the PRSP Unit was formally attached to the Ministry of Economics and Finance (Bergamaschi 2014). However, it was located in a separate building and has enjoyed relative autonomy. Since its creation in 2001, the Unit has been supported by donors (especially the European Commission) through funds and technical assistance. The Unit has not been fully accepted by other ministries, which at times have resisted its political will and remit to coordinate all public policies (Bergamaschi 2014).

The PRSP was politicised from its introduction. Most civil servants welcomed the fact that the government had to develop its own national strategy after decades of arguably imposed structural adjustment policies and the weakening of planning institutions<sup>17</sup>. At that time, the government already had a poverty reduction plan, the *Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre la Pauvreté* (SNLP), initiated and supported by UNDP. However, the IFIs did not accept this document as a basis for the PRSP, arguing that its macroeconomic framework was weak. A dispute ensued between Malian authorities, supported by the UNDP, and IFIs, which cast doubt on the World Bank’s willingness to hand over decision-making power to the government (Dante et al. 2002). Finally, a compromise was reached, whereby the IFIs accepted the SNLP as one of the pillars of the PRSP and the tensions dissipated (Bergamaschi 2011b).

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<sup>16</sup> Cellule CSLP/M. Trévoux, ‘Note sur le suivi du CSLP’, Bamako, December 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews at the Ministry of Economy and Finance, Bamako, 2008, and at the Secretariat for Aid Harmonisation, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Bamako, March 2014.

When the second PRSP (2006–2011) was drafted, two former ministers were asked to contribute. They wanted this document to be entitled ‘A Framework for Growth and Reducing Inequalities’, on the grounds that poverty reduction alone would not suffice to achieve economic development. However, one of these ministers stated in an interview that ‘we were pressured not to rock the boat’. A plethora of demands from various key players was taken into consideration by the document’s authors, and the PRSP became a long list of consensual policies with little priority ranking. In fact, the proposals of the two former ministers aimed to politicise the PRSP, which is often viewed by donors as a technical exercise. They wanted to produce a differentiated analysis of the country’s potential resources (according to the country’s social groups, economic sectors, and regions) and translate them into political choices geared towards more egalitarian wealth distribution. However, the desire to obtain as much aid as possible and adopt a consensual position domestically prevailed. The draft document was amended so that its title included a reference to economic growth (*croissance*), though.

To understand the initial insertion of the PRSP into Malian politics, it is necessary to recall that the authorities’ positioning towards the PRSP in the early 2000s was the result of a pragmatic move rather than a declaration of faith in the post-Washington consensus (Bergamaschi 2011a and 2011b).

Malian authorities adopted a pragmatic strategy of compliance (Bergamaschi 2008: 220–1) towards the post-Washington consensus and its main policy instrument, the PRSP. This position, which goes beyond ‘ownership’ and resistance, marks and reflects an important moment in the evolution of the country’s approach to managing aid dependency and its extraversion strategy since independence.

Unlike the majority of African colonies at the end of French rule, Mali unilaterally declared its independence from France on 22 September 1960 (Sidibé 2005: 341) and adopted a sovereignty-oriented, pan-African development model and a foreign policy inspired by Third Worldism. For example, the country did not join any of the various monetary, economic, political and military arrangements established by Paris. Mali’s first President, Modibo Keïta, launched a programme of rural socialism. Keïta was toppled by a coup in 1968 (Sidibé 2005: 342–4) and replaced by a military junta led by increasingly authoritarian Moussa Traoré, which lasted until 1991. Early economic difficulties forced Malian leaders to ask for help.

Aid became embedded in the country’s budget during the first decade after independence (Bonnecase 2011). Under the military regime, aid represented 83.3% of the *programme triennial* adopted by the government (Diarrah 1990: 166–8). With the devaluation (50%) of the Malian franc imposed by economic indicators in 1967, the Treasury was placed under the protection and control of France (Sidibé 2005: 352–4), which put an end to the first governments’ search for autonomy from the former colonial ruler. Mali joined the CFA franc zone in 1984 (Géronimi 2005: 453) and signed its first agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1982, 1983 and 1985.

Whereas Modibo Keïta warned against the perils of aid, his successors became accustomed to it and actively participated in international fundraising initiatives, particularly during the massive drought in the early 1970s (Bonnecase 2011). As the



different development policies were failing, aid dependency (Lancaster and Wangwe 2002) rose, and external funds were pillaged by the military junta.

After the mid-1980s, the influence of IFIs grew as a consequence of debt restructuring and structural adjustment. This was a major turn, since during the first decades after independence, Malian civil servants and development planners were trained in Eastern Europe and the USSR and inspired by Soviet-style planning (Géronimi 2005: 457). Multilateral donors attached strict economic policy conditionalities to aid. Mali became decapitalised to the point that today, 'any significant economic action (...) cannot be carried out without external finance' (Lê Châu 1992: 37–8). In October 2007, in a press interview, the Minister of Finance, Abou-Bakar Traoré, said that *'what is important is to have an economic and financial program that will be coherent enough to be accepted and supported by the international community'* – as if the development strategy were a tool to achieve aid disbursements, rather than the other way around. After 2012 and during the occupation of the Northern regions, the Bamako-based government multiplied its calls to the UN, France, ECOWAS and even NATO (via the African Union) for international support (Bamako.com 2013). This illustrates their openness towards international interventions and interference.

Foreign assistance represented 12% of the national income and 60% of public investment in 2009 (République du Mali, Ministère de l'Économie et des finances/Secrétariat à l'harmonisation de l'aide 2011: 5). The aid regime, with its consultants, per diem payments and projects, is deeply entangled in Mali's public administration and political game. The costs of divorce from the IFIs – which would entail not adopting a PRSP and exiting the HIPC process – are deemed too high by contemporary elites (Bergamaschi 2011a). Unlike some Latin American countries in the 2000s (Ranta-Owusu 2008), the government of Mali has not tried to build an alternative development path based on nationalism, ideology or indigenous worldviews.

An anecdote collected during a fieldwork mission in 2008 provides a good illustration of this. At a meeting, the PRSP Unit staff were setting up a roadmap to prepare the upcoming donor roundtable<sup>18</sup>. Placed under considerable political pressure to secure as much external funding as possible, the Unit's coordinator was trying to motivate his team. As some Unit members were drawing up a list of potential personalities to chair the event – the names of Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan or Tony Blair were mentioned – suddenly someone suggested: *'What about inviting Hugo Chávez?'* Loud laughter and whispers filled the room; and someone added: *'Doing this would be the best way for us to get absolutely no cash at this roundtable! And Bush would never come back to Mali again!'* This simple joke among colleagues is political, too, in the sense that it involves Hugo Chávez, a South American socialist leader supportive of 'anti-imperialist' and anti-neoliberal cooperation mechanisms between like-minded countries of the South. As such, it shows that Malian civil servants are fully aware of the possibility to turn to international partners other than the IFIs. But they do not envisage it as a serious option and merely treat it as a joke (Bergamaschi 2011a: 110).

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<sup>18</sup> A roundtable is a formal event whereby a recipient government describes the country's situation and presents its strategies and donors pledge financial support.

This implies that, since 2002, successive governments have engaged in a process of imperfect and partial implementation of PRSPs and, more importantly, that the trajectory of this new public policy tool has constantly changed in order to adapt to shifting conditions and to serve the interests of the actors involved.

### *The Second PRSP: Adaptation to ATT's Consensual Mode of Government*

Like its predecessor, the second PRSP was ill-suited to the political cycle, as it needed to be adopted before a presidential election (2007) again. This reveals IFIs' lack of understanding of, and respect for, domestic politics: they seem to consider that the poverty reduction strategy would be valid despite an announced change of incumbent. For the electoral campaign, President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) set forth his own 'Economic and Social Development Plan' (*Programme pour le Développement Economique et Social* or PDES), which was the only strategy that he endorsed and publicly referred to. Its priorities were the improvement of public policies, primary production and food security, the private sector, the inclusion of women and youth in productive systems, access to social services and regional integration. In the donor community, confusion soon emerged about what should be considered *the* national development policy: 'the PRSP is for donors, the PDES is for Malians', said one staff member of the European Commission delegation in Bamako in 2008.

At first glance, it looks as if the PRSP was not accepted by the President, that it had been duplicated, bypassed by the PDES and poorly embedded in the national fabric. Nevertheless, two arguments contradict this view. On the one hand, the PDES is not an alternative to the PRSP, since it borrows heavily from it. A civil servant believes that it was copied almost directly from it. In their efforts to placate donors, civil servants explained that the PDES actually borrowed from and converged with the PRSP<sup>19</sup>. In fact, a careful analysis of the document reveals that the PDES is an adapted, simplified version of the PRSP, an instrument ATT deemed technocratic and oriented towards external actors.

As shown in Table 1 (in Annex), though, the differences between the second PRSP and the President's PDES are not fundamental or structural. The presidential strategy, for example, puts more emphasis on young people (who are a major source of political opposition and resistance in the country). In other words, President Touré refused to run the presidential campaign with the PRSP, but was unable or unwilling to come up with an alternative strategy to the one supported by IFIs. Donors, not fully convinced by this argument, asked ministries and the PRSP Unit to clarify the status of the PDES but, in the midst of confusion, continued to work with and finance the PRSP.

On the other hand, when ATT (who, according to the Constitution, could not run for a third term) created a political party to carry on his legacy as an independent President in 2011, he called it the *Programme pour le Développement Economique et Social* (PDES), thus using the same title. This showed that the PRSP has been digested and fully integrated into domestic political processes through an

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<sup>19</sup> Observations during meetings held at the PRSP Unit, Bamako, 2008.

amended presidential version<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, it has been disseminated through the programmes and campaigns of all presidential candidates, and poverty reduction is the only acceptable and conceivable development paradigm in the country today<sup>21</sup>.

Since 2002, the PRSPs have also been subject to constant adaptation as the government has been eager and careful to combine it with many of its priorities, which only partly coincide with poverty reduction *per se*. These include ensuring the monopoly of the state across Mali's territory, containing social protests and fuelling clientelistic networks. To that effect, poverty reduction has been used loosely and twisted. Three governmental initiatives are good illustrations of this.

In the field of food security, the President selected from the various dimensions and objectives of poverty reduction and manoeuvred at the margins of the PRSP so as to promote his visions and interests (Bergamaschi 2011: 130–2). When international food prices rose dramatically and peaked in 2005, the President made food security a national priority, reflecting the fact that in Mali, the memory of the famine of the 1970s is strong. The Secretariat for Food Security, formerly attached to the Ministry of Agriculture, was assigned to the Presidency and national resources were mobilised to finance the National Security Stock of cereals. Cereal banks were created and free distribution schemes were put in place (Arditi 2009). In 2008, the President decided to boost and subsidise the production of rice and launched the rice initiative. ATT argued that the measure responded to an emergency and respected the poverty reduction objective edicted in the PRSP. However, he did so in a more political manner, through individual, proactive strategies. To that extent, he built on a long tradition of state regulation and direct intervention by the sovereign chiefs (emperors, princes or heads of state) operating since the Middle Ages in West Africa (Arditi 2009).

Donors did not welcome it, seeing it as a political move incompatible with existing frameworks (the PRSP and the rural development strategy) and the budget. The 'rice initiative' and subsidies also contradict the principle of market-driven cereal production, volumes and prices, and, overall, the liberalisation of the cereal trade which started in the 1980s and 1990s under pressure from the IFIs.

More importantly, the initiative was not geared towards the poorest strata of society. Indeed, in the countryside, Malians mostly eat locally grown cereals such as millet, sorghum and corn (Roy 2010a). Therefore, by giving priority to rice, the initiative clearly targeted urban populations and amounted to an attempt to buy social peace in the capital city, Bamako, at a time when urban protests were on the rise in other developing countries (Egypt, Cameroon, etc.) as a result of a dramatic increase in global food prices. The poverty reduction agenda was hence adjusted to fit some of the President's interests and priorities, which at the time also included running for a second presidential term. The initiative further served to consolidate the position of elites in the capital (civil servants, businessmen, rich peasants, NGO leaders), who were able to capture subsidies and invest in rural land (Roy 2010a: 100).

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<sup>20</sup> I thank Johanna Siméant for suggesting this phrase to me.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Prime Minister's Office, Bamako, 22/03/2013.

In the same vein, the presidential social housing programme launched in Bamako in 2004 was redirected to form or maintain a clientele. Originally targeting former soldiers and the poor, in practice it benefited military officers, high-ranking civil servants and businessmen (Le Caiman de Inde 2009; Bamanet 2009; *L'indicateur Renouveau* 2009; Zakaryaou 2007). Critics in the press called the areas where social housing was built '*ATT-bougou*' – 'ATT's neighbourhood' in Bambara, the local language.

The PRSPs lay – and must be understood – at the juncture between international standards and domestic politics, which after 2002 were characterised by 'consensus', a political system set up by ATT and in which the PRSP was totally assimilated. 'Consensus', as a mode of government, emerged from the peculiar circumstances in which President Touré was elected and characterised his two mandates until the coup which eventually toppled him (2002–2012). In 2001, the *Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali* (ADEMA) – the party in power since the democratic transition of the early 1990s – struggled to find a candidate. ATT, a former general known as the 'soldier of democracy' for his key role in the fall of military dictator Moussa Traoré in 1991 and his retreat from the political game thereafter, ran as an 'independent' representative of civil society and was elected President despite rumours of fraud (Chauzal 2005: 52). But as he had run as an independent candidate coming from civil society, he was deprived of the support of a political party, and, as a subsequent election revealed, of a majority in Parliament. For this reason, after his election he pulled together a broad coalition of all parties and civil society representatives. ATT's promise of unity was accepted by all actors because it met all of their needs: political parties felt protected from the risk of exclusion by being part of the group holding power, and ADEMA bought itself some time to better prepare for the next presidential election (Baudais and Chauzal 2006: 70).

Embassies and aid agencies initially thought that consensus could trigger the leadership and stability deemed necessary to carry out reforms. In other words, they hoped that domestic consensus would facilitate consensus with donors, foster national unity and government leadership and reduce the weight of opposition (Chauzal 2005: 82–3, 94; Chauzal 2011)<sup>22</sup>. But this assumption was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the underpinnings of ATT's rule in practice throughout the years (2002–2012).

In fact, the political system encouraged a 'weak consensus'<sup>23</sup> with donors, but it did not produce the expected 'ownership', 'leadership' or political will (Diawara 2012; Bergamaschi 2014: 357). Indeed, the coalition around ATT was not based on a shared vision or programme of development but on a fragile compromise between contradictory political forces. It was built on an ethos of conciliation and balance aimed at sharing power, not on an ethos of reform, i.e. a will or a project to

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in 2003 the United Nations Development Programme hoped that consensus would help to end social turmoil ('*accalmie sociale*' in French) (PNUD 2003).

<sup>23</sup> This phrase ('consensus mou' in French) was used by candidate Soumaïla Cissé when he acknowledged his own defeat and the victory of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in the presidential election in 2013 (France 4 2013).

modernise the country<sup>24</sup>. Malian elites adopted an intermediate posture that consisted of neither ownership nor rejection of the IFI-sponsored poverty reduction agenda.

Consensus required permanent internal negotiations and a constant redistribution of positions and resources (Baudais 2006: 588). External aid was indispensable for its survival, but the government proved unable or unwilling to pursue the key donor-promoted reforms and prescriptions. The latter were systematically subject to appropriation and adaptation instead of full, compliant implementation. The privatisation of the national cotton company, announced as early as 1998, was never implemented and was substantially adjusted to the government's concerns and demands<sup>25</sup>. On this front and many others, donor representatives were increasingly disappointed by ATT's rule.

### *The third PRSP: Sacralisation*

The preparation of the third PRSP marked its sacralisation. I use this word because it was used by one of my interviewees at the PRSP Unit in 2014, in reference to two phenomena: (i) the fact that public administrations have tried to associate regional authorities and social movements with the PRSP, thus attempting to make it the prominent, uncontested and overarching umbrella for public policies; (ii) the fact that a group of civil servants have raised it to the status of 'reference document' in the midst of increasing political tensions and instability after 2012.

With the prospect of a third PRSP, civil society organisations, in particular trade unions, were eager and invited to 'make the PRSP their own'. Civil society organisations generally experience 'participation' as a farce, i.e. a hasty, superficial exercise, supervised by donors and the government, that does not truly empower NGOs and social movements or enhance their real influence on the content of public policies and priorities. Social actors also lament that their participation in PRSP-related meetings has little impact on the document's key recommendations, and that the PRSPs have so far done little to reduce poverty and foster employment (Traoré 2012: 15).

The *Confédération syndicale des travailleurs du Mali* (CSTM), a platform of trade unions, wrote a formal letter to ask the government to include them more fully in the process. In parallel, Malian trade unions joined forces with, and gained support from, the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation to draft and promote an alternative 'trade union strategy for growth and poverty reduction', which was released in November 2012.

The confederation was willing 'to get tools of action and dialogue of [their] own' to influence policy-making and 'gain visibility' (Traoré 2012: 49). The trade unions' strategy reversed the order of priorities included in the governmental PRSP for

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<sup>24</sup> This argument was elaborated on the basis of an interview with a technical advisor to the Minister of Economy and Finance, Bamako, 02/03/2007. Researchers present the same analysis (Baudais and Chauzal 2006; Roy 2010).

<sup>25</sup> On the complex process of cotton sector reform in Mali, see Serra (2014) and Roy (2010).

2012–2017: as a result, ‘governance and institutional development’ come first, before ‘accelerated, redistributive and sustainable growth’ and ‘the development of, and access to, equitable, high-quality basic social services’. A fourth axis regarding labour and workers’ rights was added, as well as references to job creation and ‘decent work’ in the formal and informal sectors.

The document’s objectives and method were framed ambiguously as both a ‘counter-proposition’ and a ‘complement’ to the PRSP (2012: 11 and 50). The alternative strategy includes an interesting but somewhat incoherent mix of references to the OECD’s Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, harmonisation, the macroeconomic convergence criteria of the Economic Community of West African States, Marxism, ‘workers’ education’ and the global justice agenda (Traoré 2012: 33, 42, and 46). It blames the IFIs for imposing policies on governments and highlights the virtue of state-led national development planning and social development (Traoré 2012: 13). Some aspects of the political context explain why: the CSTM was critical of ATT’s policies, as opposed to the *Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali* (UNTM), which was closer to the regime and played a prominent role in distinct national representation bodies (Roy 2013). However, the CSTM’s ‘in-and-out’ positioning in the face of the PRSP reflects trade unions’ most common strategies in the 2000s. In a political context of consensus, direct opposition based on ideological grounds was not the norm, while co-optation of both parties and social organisations was rife (Roy 2010b).

The unions’ initiative looked like a call for inclusion addressed to the government rather than a rejection of the ‘World Bank thing’. Despite its reluctance to support the government and ‘opposition to any PRSP-related initiative’, the confederation eventually chose to be a part of it. Unions admittedly adopted a ‘constructive’ approach of ‘partnership’, on the grounds that the PRSP provides the framework for all public policies and that ‘getting angry’ would lead them to exclusion and powerlessness. It lists a set of ‘counter-propositions to influence the implementation of the third PRSP’ (Traoré 2012: 11 and 37); but somewhat paradoxically, the document’s format is very similar to the PRSP: it suggests identifying ‘best practices’ and setting up a technocratic monitoring committee, and proposes an accompanying list of follow-up indicators (Traoré 2012: 64).

Representatives of the PRSP Unit attended the unions’ strategy validation workshop and publicly valued the work done; the document was presented at a meeting chaired by the Ministry of Public Administration. During the meeting, the CSTM asked to benefit from capacity-building initiatives and a specific budget line geared towards trade unions. Some donor representatives promised to support them in the future. In April 2014, one CSTM representative was looking forward to taking part in upcoming PRSP follow-up exercises<sup>26</sup>. In the end, it seems that the trade union was successfully co-opted around the PRSP by the government and bought into the PRSP.

In 2011, the PRSP Unit went one step further and attempted to ‘regionalise’ the PRSP, i.e. diffuse it from the Bamako-based central administration to the country’s regions. The initiative materialised through regional consultations throughout the

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Bamako, 03/04/2014, and Traoré (2012: 38).

country during the spring of 2011. These took the form of one-day workshops with representatives of regional and local administrations, elected and religious leaders and, to a lesser extent, civil society organisations.

The priorities identified at the regional level (see Table 2 in Annex) were not fully incorporated into the PRSP. Neither was the PRSP translated into regional operational schemes. According to them, strict deadlines for adopting the PRSP were an impediment. Additionally, local priorities could only be taken into account provided that they were compatible with national planning tools and strategies and with international objectives (the MDGs, donor priorities)<sup>27</sup>.

However, the consultative process helped to diffuse the national strategy beyond the Bamako-based central administrations. The Unit collected reliable and updated information (mostly statistics) about needs and ongoing actions at the local level. Its staff had the opportunity to distance themselves from their desk-based work, to hear the aspirations of citizens in the country's different regions and to realise that 'they know what they want' – as one Unit agent who participated in the regional field mission put it. In the end, the process appears as an attempt at regional buy-in rather than a true 'regionalisation' of the PRSP's philosophy and priorities.

Alongside the wide association – or co-optation – described above, another dynamic of appropriation of the third PRSP took place. Before its adoption, the third PRSP was adjusted in order to be able to resist increasing tensions and meet the government's increasingly prominent security imperatives. After its adoption, when the political crisis culminated, the PRSP was 'sacralised' as a safeguard against political instability and chaotic policy-making.

In 2011, Malian authorities lobbied to include the issue of (in)security in the third-generation PRSP (2012–2017) as a reaction to rising tensions stemming from an ancient conflict with Tuareg armed groups in the North (Bøås 2012). When the third PRSP was drafted, tensions and fighting between the army and insurgent groups were intensifying. At the government's request, the PRSP Unit insisted that the strategy include some 'preconditions' related to 'the consolidation of peace and stability', on the grounds that there cannot be growth and development without minimal security. Funds were not specifically allocated to concrete actions and security issues, even though the government received technical and military support via the US-led Pan-Sahel Initiative and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership after 2005, which leaders in Washington D.C. justified in the name of poverty reduction and development<sup>28</sup>.

The establishment of the precondition of peace and security represented a major departure from the IFIs' model of PRSP, which is normally circumscribed to poverty reduction *sensu stricto* so as to avoid the PRSP and aid resources becoming enmeshed in conflict dynamics and violence. If bilateral donors had long taken security risks into account when designing their partnership with Mali in past years, sometimes at the risk of securitising aid and poverty reduction in the country, IFIs

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Social Development Department, PRSP Unit, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Bamako, June 2013.

<sup>28</sup> US representatives in Mali, interviews with the author, Bamako, 2007 and 2008. See also [Globalsecurity.org](http://Globalsecurity.org), Bayart (2010) and Gutelius (2007).

are often reluctant to include the highly political issues of conflict and security in PRSPs, as doing so would impede the supposedly apolitical nature of their mission and imply that, by virtue of the principles of ownership and alignment, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies could virtually be compelled to fund the army's military operations against armed groups or a reform of the security sector. This is hence an important element of the Malianisation of the PRSP.

In 2011, the third-generation PRSP was elaborated while a presidential election was scheduled for April 2012. The PRSP Unit had envisioned sharing it with civil society organisations, political parties and presidential candidates. The Unit coordinator informally met some of the candidates from the major political parties so as to give the document a higher political profile. If this was achieved, the expectation was that the Unit would later be able to better coordinate all ministries around it. More importantly, the Unit wanted to avoid the duplication of strategies and politicisation that had occurred with the PDES under ATT: the newly elected President could adjust the PRSP but, the Unit hoped, not come up with an entirely new document 'falling from the skies'<sup>29</sup>.

Their efforts were interrupted when the political crisis hit, culminating in a coup d'état in March 2012 and the subsequent conquest and occupation of the Northern regions by Tuareg and, increasingly, Islamist armed groups<sup>30</sup>. Over the course of a couple of weeks in April 2012, the state lost control over two-thirds of the territory. Most state representatives, teachers, nurses and doctors based in the North fled the violence. The actions and policies included in the PRSP (for instance, the construction or renovation of roads) were impossible to implement<sup>31</sup>. Most aid funds were suspended. Scarce state resources were used to pay for salaries and fund basic operations at the expense of investments.

The institutionalisation and future of the PRSP were once more uncertain. However, these events and temporary military rule did not marginalise the PRSP; rather, they revealed how central to bureaucratic politics it had become as agents in the Ministry of Finance and the PRSP Unit (Maliens and European technical assistants) attempted to 'sacralise' the recently adopted PRSP. In the face of political instability, they wished to elevate it to the status of 'reference framework' ('*document de référence*' in French).

Their initiative was symbolic and political. They argued that 'in a period of instability, we need to hold to stable reference points (...) and institutionalised rituals. The PRSP is one of them in the economic realm'. The third PRSP should provide a 'stable reference in the midst of turmoil (...), the logical framework to lead the transition'. Burying the PRSP would mean 'denying the continuity of the state and giving credit to those who question it' and to the military led by Captain Sanogo, who justified the March 2012 coup on account of the state's *weakness*<sup>32</sup>. The PRSP was one of the tools used by technocrats to protect the country against what they considered the risk of erratic spending by the military junta. It was then

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<sup>29</sup> Technical assistant, interview, Bamako, September 2013.

<sup>30</sup> For a summary of events, see Bergamaschi (2013).

<sup>31</sup> Interview, PRSP Unit, Bamako, March 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Previous quotes come from an interview with a technical assistant attached to the PRSP Unit, Bamako, September 2013.



used as a safeguard against erratic international support and reaction to Mali's crisis.

In preparation for the donor conference for Mali's recovery held in Brussels on 15 May 2013, some agencies, such as the UNDP and the World Bank, were eager to sideline the PRSP and urged the government to produce a new document – a *Plan d'actions prioritaires d'urgence* (or PAPU). The new strategy would be adjusted to the crisis context, seen as more 'political' by diplomats and donor headquarters, better articulated with the roadmap for the transition adopted by the government in January 2013 (in particular, concerning actions to strengthen the Malian army and deal with refugees), more limited in scope (only relevant for 2013–2014) and hence easier to monitor. But in the midst of crisis, public administrations tried again to protect the PRSP, i.e. to ensure that medium-term planning – embedded in the PRSP – would prevail over political instability and that the PRSP would not be replaced or sidelined by crisis-related temporary public policies or emergency action plans.

The PRSP Unit, the Ministry of Finance and the authors of the Plan for the Sustainable Recovery of Mali 2013–2014 (PRED) reached a compromise and stated that the PRED was an amended version, or a 'special modality of the PRSP'<sup>33</sup>. Some elements of the roadmap for the transition were added to the third PRSP and the document was translated into English. The PRSP Unit lobbied and convinced donors and the government that the diagnosis produced in 2011 had not been fundamentally challenged. The situation called for specific, urgent measures, but they argued that 'Malian authorities must articulate them with ongoing projects and programmes and national resources'<sup>34</sup>. The government received support from France and the European Commission's delegation in Bamako and the PRSP was recognised as the 'reference document' by the actors involved.

After the presidential election held in 2013, the new government led by President Ibrahim Boubakar Keïta presented a Governmental Action Plan (*Plan d'Action Gouvernemental* or PAG) to overcome the crisis and restore order and stability in the country. As with the PDES some years earlier, the PRSP was challenged by a competing, more political strategy. The PRSP Unit and its technical assistants engaged in another lobbying initiative to protect the document against political interference. For instance, in March 2014, they organised a seminar about the links between the PRSP, the PRED and the PAG. They clarified the overall scheme of public policies, arguing that a document endorsed by the Prime Minister could not claim to be a 'reference document' because of the possibility of government reshuffles. Moreover, they claimed that the PRSP was the contract on which international donors had committed to aid Mali prior to the crisis. They also put forward that the PRSP was the only document able to build a bridge between the national budget and public finances, and that its follow-up indicators had been used by hundreds of civil servants in the ministries and the technical services for many years.

In other words, public servants have recently come to regard the PRSP as a guarantee of bureaucratic continuity and rigour against political interference and

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with a technical assistant, Bamako, September 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with a technical assistant, Bamako, September 2013.

fuzziness in a highly volatile environment, and as a safeguard against political turmoil. Accordingly, the PRSP survived the crisis and is seemingly being implemented through its imperfect but normal channels and procedures.

## Concluding remarks: the past and future of aid, international intervention and appropriation in Mali

This Working Paper has shown that the diffusion of the poverty reduction agenda in the past fifteen years in Mali has proceeded through processes of adaptation rather than through donor imposition or government 'ownership'. Since their introduction in Mali in 2002, the three PRSPs have been appropriated and used strategically for different purposes and in various ways by public actors, governmental or not. This, it is argued, has contributed to 'Malianising' the PRSPs, i.e. to embedding them in the country's socio-political fabric and adapting them to the national needs and context.

I suggest abandoning the normative notion of 'ownership' in studies of the politics and effects of aid in sub-Saharan Africa and substituting the notion of appropriation, which instead paves the way for a multidisciplinary approach sensitive to the power dynamics and recipient agency in the face of aid's global prescriptions. This suggestion extends beyond the aid debate, as 'ownership' has further been promoted by actors and institutions in the field of post-conflict intervention and used as an analytical tool by scholars in the peacebuilding debate as well (Donais 2009; Wilén 2014; Franke and Esmenjaud 2008: 137–58; Lemay-Hébert 2011).

The article also argues that the specificity of the PRSPs' implementation in Mali is closely related to the country's past extraversion strategies and to the workings of its political system in the early 2000s. These factors were crucial for shaping the government's strategy of compliance towards donors. In this context, recipient agency did not consist of a rejection of, or resistance to, the post-Washington consensus, but rather of its successive adaptation and appropriation by politicians and technicians alike. As a result, the PRSP has become a superposition of layers that have accumulated through political consensus and crisis. The strategy has competed with, and influenced, other governmental strategies, documents and action plans.

Through their specific trajectory, the PRSPs in Mali clearly distanced themselves from the ideal scenario envisaged by IFIs (Bergamaschi 2011a). This means that the hegemonic and monolithic project of global governance channelled through aid is constantly being reworked and re-negotiated at the local level. At the same time, this policy tool, once considered as a 'World Bank thing', has become a normal and central pattern of public policy. The PRSP has been used for political purposes by public actors, who regard it as a 'reference document', not because of its content, but because it can be instrumental to their multiple political strategies, developmental or not. The processes of adaptation and appropriation described in the article have made the PRSPs truly Malian, i.e. tailored to the needs of the political environment and events.

As such, the PRSPs have been fully incorporated into national politics and Mali's 'international State' (Slaughter in Dezalay 2002: 313), whose public policies, policy orientations and tools are permanently influenced and penetrated by donors. The PRSPs' vagueness, adaptability and lack of prioritisation paradoxically contribute to their diffusion rather than their rejection or failure. By scaling up these findings, I argue that the often-criticised one-size-fits-all character of aid policy tools, combined with their vagueness, do not lead to their rejection or failure. On the contrary, it allows for their appropriation by distinct actors and facilitates their embedding in different contexts. What is at stake, then, is to identify the factors affecting the strategies and tactics, the processes and consequences of this appropriation, which are always time- and context-specific.

Because development buzzwords seal agreements around loose commitments such as ownership or poverty reduction, they can be taken up and manipulated by recipients. The limits, deviations and bypassing practices observed in policy implementation make donor products acceptable and useful to different actors, thus sustaining their relevance in the distinct political and institutional settings of recipient countries. This means that ambiguity, flexibility and malleability contribute to the diffusion of aid's recommendations and to their success as much as – or even instead of – their failure<sup>35</sup>. Success is not understood here as the achievement of development objectives or otherwise, but rather as their progressive and wide diffusion in many poor but different countries through their appropriation by aid recipients.

The future uses and effects of the PRSP (the third-generation PRSP which covers the period 2012–2017) are once again uncertain. International intervention in the country has considerably extended its scope and is transforming rapidly under the influence of humanitarian actors, the pursuit of military and security objectives (with Serval and Barkhane, two successive French military operations) and peacebuilding activities with the launch of a UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (Minusma) on 1 July 2013. While Mali's political crisis has triggered a crisis of the aid regime, the *modus operandi* and purposes of international processes of involvement in Mali have shifted from development assistance for poverty reduction and aid efficiency towards a superimposition of rationales and a more complex environment. Fieldwork carried out in Bamako in 2014 revealed that there is intense competition between development, security and humanitarian actors and an emerging division of labour in their interventions, as well as occasional hybridisation of their practices. This leads to a proliferation of actions and organisations and also to fragmentation of the international intervention of Mali. The PRSP was 'sacralised' as the reference document and considered a guarantee for the stability, continuity and quality of public policies after the 2012 coup. I hypothesise that, thanks to the instrument's adaptability and due to its appropriation by different actors, the status of the PRSP III will evolve, and that the document will once again be adapted to the country's new circumstances. As a consequence, it is unlikely to disappear or lose its relevance.

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<sup>35</sup> Here, I draw on Jacqueline Best's point about the role of ambiguity and lack of transparency in the survival, adaptation and resulting success of Bretton Woods institutions since the Second World War (Best 2005).

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**Table 1: Priorities defined in the main poverty reduction strategies in Mali, including the three PRSPs and the *Programme de Développement Economique et Social (1998-2017)***

Document's name & duration	Origin & status	Priorities & objectives
<b>Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre la Pauvreté (1998–2002)</b>	Malian government with UNDP support  Presented at the roundtable with donors held in Geneva in 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the legal, social, economic and cultural environment</li> <li>• Promote job-creating activities and self-employment</li> <li>• Enhance the poor's access to financial services and production factors, education and training, basic health, water and sanitation, and habitat</li> <li>• Improve performance of agriculture and food production</li> </ul>
<b>PRSP I (2002–2006)</b> Cadre Stratégique de Lutte contre la Pauvreté	Government of Mali, IFI conditionality and approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic development and growth</li> <li>• Human and social development</li> <li>• Good governance</li> </ul>
<b>PRSP II (2007–2011)</b> Cadre Stratégique de Croissance et de Réduction de la Pauvreté	<i>Idem</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic focus: productive sector development, public sector reform, consolidation of the social sector</li> <li>• Priority axis of action: food security and rural development, development of small and medium enterprises, the environment and natural resource management, public administration reform, reform of the business environment, development of the financial sector and of infrastructures, promotion of democratic governance, civil liberties and civil society, consolidation of regional integration and African unity, creation of sustainable jobs, improving access to basic social services, fight against HIV/AIDS, integration into the multilateral trade system</li> <li>• Strategy for accelerated growth</li> </ul>
<b>Programme pour le Développement Economique et Social (PDES) (2007–2012)</b>	President ATT's political programme during the 2007 election campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renewal of public action</li> <li>• Primary production and food security</li> <li>• Development of the private sector</li> <li>• Integration of women and youth in productive channels</li> <li>• Social sectors</li> <li>• Reforms of social practices</li> </ul>
<b>Rice Initiative, 2008</b>	President ATT	Food security
<b>PRSP III (2012-2017)</b> Cadre Stratégique de Croissance et de Réduction de la Pauvreté	Government of Mali, IFI conditionality and approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General objective: 'An emerging Mali, a better quality of life for all'</li> <li>• Two preconditions: strengthening peace and stability and the macroeconomic framework</li> <li>• Strategic axis of action: accelerated growth, social services, institutional development and governance</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Summary of the main priorities identified during the regional consultations for the PRSP III, by region (2011)**

Bamako	Kidal	Sikasso	Kayes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce negative health impacts, manage anarchic urbanisation, improve housing and transport</li> <li>• Deal with land issues, increase access to non-polluted water and waste management</li> <li>• Reduce incivility and the degradation of values, improve road safety, boost citizen trust in security forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve access by upgrading the road network and aviation services throughout the region</li> <li>• Improve the resources of local communities, develop oasis agriculture, improve fossil water exploitation, facilitate girls' access to schools, create a university</li> <li>• Incentivise civil servants to work in the region, facilitate the return of all state services and administrations and the reintegration of returning refugees</li> <li>• Install security forces in all communities, multiply patrols at the border and establish clear trade rules with Algeria, create a detention centre and a court of first instance in Kidal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensify animal husbandry by introducing productive breeds</li> <li>• Improve the units for the transformation and conservation of food (including of animals and cattle)</li> <li>• Create industrial units and a university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise the mining code to take local communities' concerns into account and closely monitor mining zones. Develop studies on HIV and on air and water quality</li> <li>• Diversify agriculture, maintain infrastructures</li> <li>• Create an observatory on migration, invest remittances in growth-generating sectors</li> <li>• Improve youth employment</li> <li>• Intensify cross-border cooperation</li> </ul>



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