Included or excluded? Civil society, local agency and the support given by European aid programmes

PAOLA MINOIA

Minoia, Paola (2012). Included or excluded? Civil society, local agency and the support given by European aid programmes. *Fennia* 190: 2, pp. 77–89. ISSN 1798-5617.

This article analyses some problems emerging in aid practices aimed to support civil society in developing countries. First, it reports the debate emerged in critical development studies regarding non-state actors, and particularly nongovernmental organizations, which have progressively substituted public institutions in service provision and in representative forums, often as a consequence of external pressures made by international donors. Secondly, it analyses the European aid programme named "Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development", whose aim is to fight poverty and increase governance through actions empowering local organisations. More specifically, it evaluates the programme's coherence and effectiveness in five visited countries (Georgia, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Cameroon) and, particularly, in two projects based in Rwanda. These two case studies show very different results as far as local involvement. Interviews, field visits and analyses of project reports reveal the diverse nature of the various organizations that compose the non-state actors, and their different capacity to express local agency. External donors need to redefine their aid relations in a way to effectively empower the most vulnerable groups.

Keywords: non-state actors, nongovernmental organisations, European aid, local agency, Rwanda

Paola Minoia, Department of Geosciences and Geography, PO Box 64 (Gustaf Hällströmin katu 2), 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: paola.minoia@helsinki.fi

Introduction: research questions and context

This article presents some points of reflection about aims, means and results of European Community (EC) programmes aiming to support civil society groups in developing countries. It includes some findings of a study in which the author has been recently engaged, as part of a team reviewing the first phase (2007–10) of the EC-funded programme *Non State Actors and Local Authorities in Development* (NSA-LA) (EC 2007; McCormick et al. 2009).

The main goal of this programme, which is still ongoing, is to strengthen local livelihoods and democratic participation of civil society by funding initiatives proposed by non-state actors (NSAs) and local authorities (LAs). However, the involvement of LAs is still marginal compared to the stronger role of NSAs; therefore, this article will have a specific focus on NSAs. The involvement of NSAs is meant to bridge the gap between communities and donors. Nongovernmental organizations, civil society and particularly, vulnerable communities and deprived groups, are the main targets of this programme, in line with the Millennium Development Goals that were officially established following the United Nations Millennium Declaration (UN 2000; UNDP 2012). The idea behind this choice is that NSAs can operate more effectively and liberally than state authorities when dealing with civil society; therefore, they are considered to be in the best position to support grassroots initiatives and empower communities. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this idea is coherent with a broader, neoliberal approach that has become internationally predominant in the aid sector.

The choice to give a stronger role to NSAs and LAs is based on their double *accountability:* on one hand, they can operate closely with local communities, assess their needs, upscale their grassroots initiatives, and represent them in front of public authorities or within large and transnational networks (*down accountability*, Desai 2008); on the other hand, compared to the informal grassroots groupings they represent, NSAs and LAs are provided with sufficient structural organization and financial capacities, which make them accountable towards the donors (*upward accountability,* ibid.*).*

According to the EC guidelines, the NSA category includes nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, professional associations and small and medium enterprises (SMEs); however, NGOs and, particularly, international NGOs (INGOs) are the predominant actors because of their more advanced professionalization in the aid industry, where cosmopolitanism and professionalization, entrepreneurial organisation, financial capacity and competitiveness are important assets (Baillie Smith & Jenkins 2011). The LAs group includes decentralized public authorities (PAs) such as regions, provinces, municipalities, specialized public bodies as well as PAs associations. As far as it was observed in several EC projects, LAs are also often closely supported by NGOs with particular expertise to access external funding.

Based on theories and field assessment work, the aim of this article is to discuss the pertinence of the European 'NSA-LA programme' to effectively address the needs of vulnerable groups, empower civil society, and respect their agency and local ownership. The critical aspects are both in the power-relations between NGOs and informal communities, and in the logics of the project-cycle approach. In fact, external and frequently rushed expectations operating through business plans may deplete the true potential of the cooperation between civil society and the NGOs or other intermediation bodies (Holmén 2009).

This paper is based both on critical development theories and on field research carried out as part of consultancy work for the EC. Critical theories have helped in locating the NSAs empowerment within a global trend of state disempowerment and shift of responsibility towards private organizations, social associations and decentralized authorities. Through the field work I could approach different case studies and observed that these same principles were behind the current Eu-

ropean policies of aid towards civil society organizations. Nevertheless, it was relevant to see if specific programmes like this one have been beneficial towards community-based initiatives; if the professionalism of strong NGOs has favoured or rather challenged the deployment of grass roots initiatives; and what have been the most determining factors of failure or success at the project level.

A relevant part of the assessment questioned about the involvement of local communities in project design and implementation. Was the funding granted to NSAs (often INGOs) concretely supporting local initiatives? How were the partnerships between grant holders and beneficiaries formed? Were the involved actors representing vulnerable and deprived community groups; did they reflect their needs and were they able to empower them? Did they involve local activists, and how was the project approach operationally functioning to support local agency? And finally, were calls for proposals adequate to select community-relevant actions?

The fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2009. It initially involved a review of academic literature, official documents and reports and other sources. Thereafter, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were organized in Europe (Belgium and Italy) and in five beneficiary countries (Georgia, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Cameroon) with EU and national civil servants, NGOs operators, trade-unionists and cooperative workers engaged in aid activities. A few project sites were also visited. Each one of the visited countries has shown different NSAs' needs and working conditions[1].

Debating non-state actors in public fields

Programmes of direct support from large donor institutions towards NGOs have been criticized for being politically biased towards goals conceived externally, rather than reflecting local interests. Critical and post-development scholars have highlighted the controversial relations that are embedded in aid activities characterized by external inference into the local sovereignty, and recognized as post-colonial relations (Escobar 1995; Sparke 2006). Nowadays, proposals that do not refer to the Millennium Development Goals, or that are not aligned with policy goals of economic liberal-

ism and western-style democracy, end up with little support from international donors.

Contradictions and risks are caused by various pressures for paths of change. Some common features have been observed in the literature. First of all, pressures for democratic reforms are often driven by external actors, either directly or indirectly, rather than by intrinsic political dynamism (Willis 2005). Second, the newly empowered actors are often professional mediators, far from being expressions of the social capital available within the target systems (Casson et al. 2009). A third common aspect relates to the global neoliberal environment which calls for the NSA to engage in service provision that was previously under the public administrations' responsibility. In developing countries, where public budgets have been severely cut by structural adjustment programmes promoted by the World Bank since the eighties in order to decrease state spending, vital services have been transferred either to the private sector, particularly when the service has a secure market value (e.g. municipal water supplies, energy distribution, public transport), or to other non-for-profit associations (Harvey 2005).

In neoliberal environments, discourses and ideological contexts have been constructed to not only legitimize reduced state control over their own territories, but to make it normatively desirable (Swyngedow 2007). Forms of public-private partnership have been introduced, raising important questions of governance, because of shifts in the axis of responsibilities, traditionally assigned to state actors representing the public good, towards private entities. In some cases, state's withdrawals and transfer of responsibilities are embedded in the discourses of local communities' empowerment, and associations have been created by top-down regulations, with no sufficient transfer of capacities and financial means to act in technically complex situations. The result has often been far from a social empowerment; instead, further deprivation and emigrations of affected communities have been observed (Minoia & Guglielmi 2008).

From the Johannesburg Summit (UN 2002) onwards, practices of the state's disengagement and intervention of non-public entities have become widely accepted and have incorporated new values. Particular emphasis has been given to the political aspects of governance. NGOs are generally considered to be able to act closer to the people and thus, to have better potential to respond adequately to their needs. They are seen as complementary to public institutions not only to provide basic services to marginalized communities, but also as community-speakers in front of institutional authorities, and as representatives of the civil society. Moreover, they are considered to enhance democratic relations and to respect human rights, playing the role of watchdog relative to the practises of public authorities (Welch & Nuru 2006). The role of NGOs in *good governance* has been recognized to be fundamental for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and their involvement is a requirement in the poverty reduction strategy of the World Bank (Levinsohn 2003). A UNDP Report (2002) even considers the number of developmental NGOs as an 'objectively good governance' indicator.

Other points of view, however, consider this transition from representative *governments* to *governance* as a serious problem of democracy inherent in neoliberal systems (Harvey 2005). This problem appears more evident when it involves private business companies, but it is seldom recognized when it involves NGOs.

In critical development literature, ideas of mystification of the NGOs roles have been further unveiled, to the extent that a *tyranny in participation* has been conceptualised (Cooke & Kothari 2001). The critique regards the strong influence of NGOs in establishing the agenda of local development, despite a lack of delegation from the targeted civil society. According to these arguments, the NGO strengthening would pre-empt true democracy, because of a lack of transparency *vis-à-vis* the mode of formation, appointed boards of representatives and core missions of these powerful bodies. Progress in this concept has also deployed a polarization of NGOs: on the one hand, large and mainly international NGOs are able to increase their business and influence, while on the other hand, weaker entities engage their participation in a form of *subjection* towards this donor-centred system and with a *de-politicization* of their original agenda (Williams 2004).

This debate has recently reached donors and is being considered by the European officers in charge of international aid programmes. Compared to other public institutions (i.e. USAID), the European Union is relatively new to forms of direct cooperation with NSA, not channelled via state bodies of the beneficiary countries. For this reason, a mid-term evaluation was called in 2009 to assess the effectiveness of this form of aid through

the new programme NSA-LA. Funds are granted through competitive calls for proposals to NSA, mainly NGOs, and to a minor degree to LA, which are also relevant actors in countries where state authorities have launched decentralization processes. The following section will present issues that have emerged during this programme review.

Strong and weak actors within the NSA group

At the time of the review (McCormick et al. 2009), the NSA-LA programme had only been under implementation for two years[2]. It was based upon earlier NGO financing programmes and decentralised cooperation instruments, and presented four main points of innovation. First, it applied the EU de-concentration policy, making EU Delegations responsible for managing calls for proposals for in-country projects. In this way, local EC offices would have better possibilities to get local contacts and to respond to the country's needs. Second, the new programme targeted NSAs, and therefore involved, besides the traditional NGOs, a variety of structured organisations, i.e. trade unions and cooperatives. Third, the programme also introduced local authorities as new actors for decentralized cooperation. Last but not least, Southern NSAs or LAs were allowed to propose and co-ordinate actions without having to involve EU-based NSAs, contrarily to what was a pre-requirement in earlier aid programmes.

For the sake of clarity, it is also relevant to mention that the NSA-LA programme is not the only EC instrument supporting civil society. Others are also in place, i.e. the broad European Development Fund (EDF) in the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP), based on the Cotonou Agreement of 2000; the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR); and other thematic financing programmes targeting specific issues like migration, food security and the environment. All these programmes are funded through calls for proposals. However, in some countries, and particularly in those affected by war or political crisis, the NSA programme (sometimes without the LA component) is the only cooperation instrument of the EC providing direct support to the affected communities. This possibility is ensured by the fact that the funded projects do not require to be negotiated with the governments of the beneficiary countries, since the principle is to support local civil society organisations. In the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Iran and Zimbabwe, for instance, no other EU cooperation mechanisms are in place[3].

As already said, it is evident that despite the programme's title, NGOs still dominated the grant-receiving projects: trade unions and cooperatives are too new to the scene to compete for grants with strong, established, experienced NGOs, as are local authorities. Essentially, the playing field is not even, and the actors the programme intended to target are at a distinct disadvantage compared with NGOs and INGOs. In some instances, these smaller/newer actors were not even given a chance to compete, and some interviewed NGO representatives were unaware about this programme; cooperatives and SMEs met in Georgia were not recognized as not-for-profit organizations and therefore said they were not eligible for this grant.

Local authorities were also new in this field, and their participation in the calls was constrained by various circumstances. In Georgia, LAs proposals were coordinated by NGOs as LAs were considered as not sufficiently capable of producing acceptable project documents. Furthermore, the central government was not in favour of allowing LAs to receive external financing beyond local taxation and state provision. As for the Palestinian Occupied Territories, including Hamas' ruled municipalities, the European Parliament declared LAs ineligible to receive funding from this programme. In Cameroon, the European Commission only activated the NSAs component because of wide corruption problems in the public sector. Also in countries where LAs are eligible for this programme, their involvement is generally weak. For instance, in Rwanda the information about this funding was blocked by certain LAs in order to limit the competition. In Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Georgia, LA-dedicated calls did not have sufficient respondents, which demonstrates that basic information about grant opportunities have higher market value than the very capacity to build good partnerships for development and sustainable initiatives.

Power- and competitive relations

The core aim of the NSA programme is to provide support for local actors and their initiatives, no matter what their sectors of intervention. The programme is said to be *actor-oriented* and to respect the *right of initiative* of the proposers. However, a

first contradiction appears in the definition of priority areas that are presented in the calls for proposals. Although not generally and unilaterally preconceived, these are decided at the country level in meetings organized by the EC delegation and involving NSAs. While INGOs and other strong, mainly capital-based NGOs are effectively involved, most deprived, rural and remotely-based civil society organisations that theoretically constitute the core beneficiary group of this programme, encounter a series of practical constraints (logistical, digital, relational, political etc.) that make them out of reach. This first selection of thematic areas consequently weakens those actors aiming at initiatives that are not included in the calls' priorities.

Problems arise because civil society is difficult to be conceptualized and even recognized, given its multiple forms and informal practices (McEwan 2009). This is the first main challenge that donors face when they aim to financially support community-based initiatives. Communities and activist groups are linked together through informal networks orienting their practices: e.g. groups related by gender, ethnicity, neighbourhoods, ancestral lands, spatial practices and interests; while in very limited cases their agency is expressed in the form of associations (Green & Haines 2012). Therefore, despite the programme's intentions, NGOs and INGOs end up being the main actors engaged, instead of the local community organizations. This is because informality is not accepted by donors who work under neoliberal pressures to securitize the financial transfer to selected grant holders. These have to be organisations with legal status, pre-acquired financial capacities and documented project experiences. Groups deprived of financial and operational assets, no matter their strong human, social and cultural capitals, need to build partnerships with structured organisations, if they want to benefit from the European aid programmes. As a matter of fact, as we will see later in this chapter, in most cases it is the other way round: external NSAs look for locally-based organisations to carry out parts of their projects. In both cases, project activities are coordinated by external NSAs taking responsibility despite poor linkages with the target communities.

Similar problems appear when active associations are not legally recognised by their own states, often for political reasons. This precludes them from finding funders outside their own state as well, e.g. in OPT, Georgia and Zimbabwe.

In many countries, activists said that the aid industry was dominated by large NGOs and INGOs in terms of physical and human capitals, i.e. internet access, data sources and specialized knowledge in project writing, administration and reporting.

In particular, the project-cycle approach seems to be limiting the potential of local initiatives. It derives from procedures elaborated in external formal environments that are poorly adapted to the intervention areas and practically constraint the effective support to local actors. Project elaborations need to include convincing narratives in the official language of the EC (mainly English or French), work plans and budgets; all applications and other communications have to be dealt through the internet. The language is already a relevant barrier for the majority of the visited areas, since other languages are locally used. The administrative and financial aspects require specialized knowledge of the European rules and regulations, for which dedicated professionals are needed. Internet access is an issue, particularly in rural areas and remote regions, but also in large and the capital cities. These problems, and many others, contribute to widening the distance between community-based organisations and donors, and even between local beneficiaries and granted NGOs that coordinate the programmes. At the same time, INGOs' capacity to address bureaucratic complications empowers them as suitable gateways for the European aid towards the local areas and their development problems.

These problems were acknowledged by the interviewed EC officers, but explained away as part of a short-term learning curve and a set of things that eventually solve themselves. For them, partnerships with these large, experienced NGOs would somehow allow professionalism and resources to be transferred on local partners: a learning exercise for the newer, smaller organisations.

This *laissez-faire* approach sounded quite naïve, however. First of all, multi-partnership is not new but has existed for decades, and in poor areas it has mostly failed to produce operational autonomy or to generate sufficient financial capacities to take over the development business. Large NGOs, well equipped in terms of country offices, skilled personnel and fund-raising support from their headquarters, will probably remain highly competitive for a long period ahead. In some cases, INGOs having their headquarters out of Europe, have also acquired official addresses in Europe

and even in Southern countries, to be eligible for EC funding. Their longstanding presence in project areas has strengthened their professionalization and upward accountability, while at the same time it has deepened their capacities to influence local development and even act on behalf of local communities in front of donors. During the interviews, some local activists argued that the NGOs paternalistic attitude and local control was undermining the self-reliance of beneficiary groups. There is the need, then, to produce objective assessments of the down accountability of granted NGOs towards the target communities.

Interviews with staff of INGOs benefiting from EC funding also revealed other constraints caused by the project-cycle approach. They agreed that the project selection was prioritizing well-packed proposals against locally-rooted ideas that were not expressed in accordance with the guidelines. Call openings were seen as occasions to elaborate new project ideas, rather than to provide opportunities to strengthen and upscale pre-existing ideas or initiatives carried out by actors operating in poor conditions. Interviewed development practitioners said that the funded proposals had been entirely planned in their offices, and that local partners were often selected at a later stage, mainly to provide specific services to local communities, with tasks based on contracts. Relations between coordinating and executing partners were sometimes problematic; in a project based in Palestine, a local partner was even replaced since it was failing to deliver in accordance with the contract agreement.

Other constraints were caused by the available budgets in the calls for proposals, which in various cases influenced the work plans. For example, one INGO's operator mentioned that commonly "*NSA budgets limits are 400,000 Euros per project, which provides a maximum roof of two years of work for international personnel in the field plus other running costs, including the NGO office rental*". After two years, then, their human resources need to be re-employed in new projects. Surely local employees would cost less, but their priority was to guarantee the job to their international staff, who had invested their professional life there.

These practices constitute serious obstacles to the goals of local empowerment. In the worse cases, project-cycles involved complex actions implemented in tight schedules, no matter what the community requirements, absorptive capacities, ownership and consolidation of the results.

Partnerships in the field: Rwanda

The field work included some visits to selected project sites or at least to project personnel. The majority of the actions funded by the NSA-LA programme were located within the capital regions, and only a few were based in peripheral areas. Besides project-specific and technical problems, the issues of the local agency's representation emerged in most visits. Some projects were clearly following a top-down approach and were granted because of their professionalism in fund raising, while only a few of them were truly community-based initiatives with clear local ownership. These latter ones also deserved attention, particularly for the way in which the local agency was expressed.

I will now briefly present two case studies based in Rwanda. The first one represents the category of projects elaborated from distant offices and giving the implementing NGO a dominant role over the involved communities, while the second one represents a best practice, in which the leading NGO provides administrative and financial support to a genuinely local initiative.

A) 'Support to social and economic integration of historically-marginalized people (Batwa)'

This project was located in the Kayonza Province, a peripheral region of Rwanda (Fig. 1). Although the proposal was designed and coordinated by a Rwandese NGO, a group of professionals headed by a former UN-officer and based in Kigali, the application was formally submitted by the Kayonza district for two reasons: to facilitate the approval under the LAs-dedicated call that did not have as much competition as the NSA sub-call, and also because the project responded to a specific need of the province, to comply with tasks assigned by the national government.

In fact, the Kayonza mayor needed to resettle 200 Batwa families, who had been displaced from a forest region at the border with the RD Congo. The national government asked the Province of Kayonza to take care of the housing needs of this group of 1057 people, and the LA chose two villages, Nyamirama and Kageyo, where returnees from refugee camps in Tanzania, mainly of Tutsi origin, had already been settled. Batwa's displacement was due to a national conservation project for which their presence was a factor of disturbance to the equilibrium of living species (conservation refugees, Dowie 2009), although their past
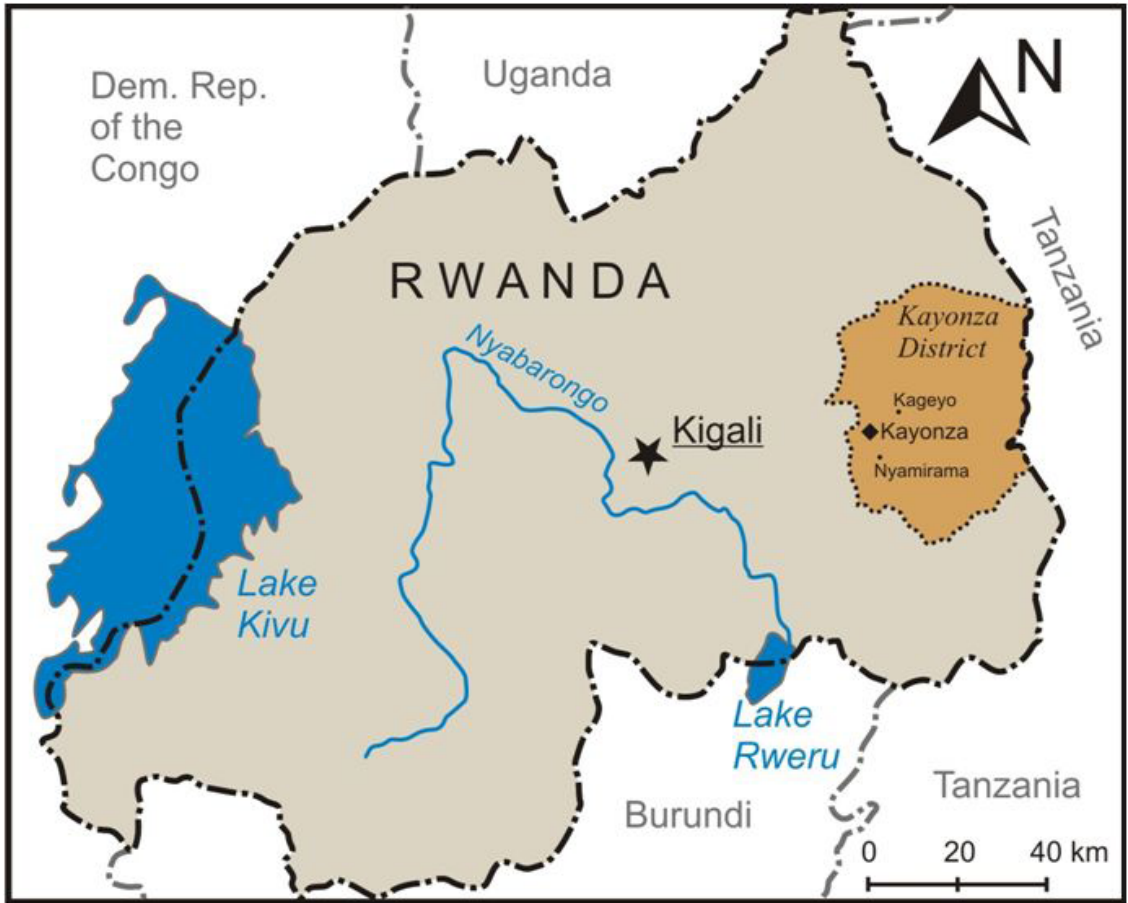
Fig. 1. Map of Rwanda.

history proves that they were part of the forest eco-system (Robbins 2004). In the new relocation are-as, Batwa families were not allowed to keep their nomadic life but were obliged to settle. The project also reflected the national priority of social recon-ciliation in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide (Kinzer 2008). A basic principle of president Kag-ame's policy was the peaceful cohabitation in mixed neighbourhoods, with no more signs of ra-cial distinctions that were a legacy of the colonial rulers from the 1920s and 1930s (Hintjens 1999). Therefore, it was decided that the two communi-ties, despite their cultural differences, had to live together in the new village areas. Batwa families had to find shelter and basic earning in those vil-lages, while the returnees had a relatively better situation, particularly in Nyamirama, where hous-es had already been built by an international Christian association. The action also included start-up activities of poultry and beekeeping for basic earning in both villages.

The situation in the field revealed a situation of dominant power relations of the implementing NGO towards the local population. The district ad-ministration had delegated the project coordina-tion role to the NGO, which had full responsibility for any provision of services (e.g. purchase of ma-terials, design of the housing project, relation with the building company, etc.). The absence of active involvement of the target communities was evi-dent, particularly within the Batwa group, whose relocation had weakened their traditional liveli-

hoods and social capital. There was a different status between Batwa and returnees: while the first group was heavily affected by racial prejudice and was maintaining a silent relation with both the NGO and the other group, the latter had a progressively better situation and in Nyamirama they had one member employed by the project as a reference point for the management group.

The passive acceptance of the project by the Batwa group allowed the works to proceed, despite the fact that the action was revealing strong weaknesses: poor house construction materials, no connection to drinking water, sanitation networks, or electricity; lack of chimneys or ventilation despite the practice of indoor fires; no economic start-ups initiated (by the time of the visit, that was only few months before the end of the project), because the arrival of chicks and bees had been delayed; and no civil society empowerment-related activities, at all.

Clearly, the empowerment of civil society along self-determined development patterns, which was proposed as project goal, did not have realistic bases. Extreme poverty of the target group, deprivation of capital assets and destruction of social networks made the local groups so much weaker that local authorities could operate through the leading non-local NGO, top-down interventions of social re-engineering, and livelihoods rebuilding from zero (Scoones 1998). The external NGO operated in full adherence with the main national policies. The coherence with the principles of national pacification was sufficient to attract European funding, to the extent that neither the specific goals of the project, its methodology, operational modalities or cost-effectiveness, had been questioned. On the contrary, the implementing NGO was complying with the existing NSA-LA guidelines, and were therefore successful in front of the EC (upward accountability), despite low linkages with the target communities (down accountability). The project was in a remote area and visits from EC officers had not taken place, since EC procedures did not prescribe project assessments during or at the end of the implementation[4]. Finally, the programme guidelines did not ensure that the top-down intervention would create sustainable benefits to the locals; this kind of partnership has not enhanced local capacities. There does not appear to have been an improvement of local organisational ability, or position to (for instance) apply for a grant like this themselves someday.

B) 'Empowering Nyamirambo Women's centre'

This small-scale project was formally proposed by a Slovenian NGO, to support an idea expressed by a local women's association based in Nyamirambo, a poor and multicultural suburb of Kigali. The idea was simple but very strong: to empower local women by strengthening the Nyamirambo Women's Centre (NWC). The small centre was shared by a group of 18 women, some of which were single mothers and/or had been subjected to violence. The methodology was based on the acquisition of tools that could qualify them to manage the centre and to provide learning initiatives and vocational training for themselves and for other women in the same situation. Some members had a university degree, but did not have adequate opportunities to generate income or political interest about issues of social vulnerability of women in their neighbourhood. The visit to the centre revealed the presence of a group of active members, animated by interests that were at the same time political and practical: on the one hand, to sensitize about gender-based violence and women's and children's rights, and on the other hand, to enable participation of women in local decision making, particularly where gender segregation is stronger for matters of education.

The participation of the Slovenian NGO coordinating the project was limited to the provision of training on project design, financial accounting, administration and evaluation. Self-organised activities included awareness campaigns and educational programs aimed to improve knowledge and employability of NWC members (e.g. to run small commerce or acquire property of land, house and vehicles), and to widen the group of associates from Nyamirambo and beyond. The strategy also included initiatives of responsible tourism, to favour the cultural encounter between NWC members and external visitors. Tourists could experience local life styles, sleep in local houses and learn local handcraft skills, and they could voluntarily contribute to the NWC activities by offering short training sessions. Courses of written English and ICT were among the most popular initiatives. This type of international networking, locally based, could scale up the good practice and favour further cooperation opportunities (NWC 2012).

Like the previous project based in Kayonza, this one was also clearly aligned with the national pol-

icy on multi-ethnic cohabitation, and it was also respondent to the Millennium Development Goals, with particular reference to the goal 'promote gender equality and empower women'. However, the success of this project was primarily based on local agency, clear ownership of the initiative, and on fair relation between partners. The foreign NSA was effectively instrumental to the local agency and maintained the double focus on both down and upward accountability. Another factor of success was the combination of practical initiatives with a clear political agenda of this women group. The NWC was a community-based organization that was becoming increasingly structured, and strong. The project size was small and easily manageable as it was mainly relying upon local resources, but it could potentially increase in a successive run, would the group suggest a more complex activity plan. Therefore, this cooperation was overall sustainable and contributed in building up the basis for future initiatives of the centre.

The localization of the centre played, however, a relevant role. Being in the capital area, the group could attract highly educated activists and be in touch with international travellers and volunteers, as well as with donors. Another issue to be considered is then: how to reach groups that are geographically and digitally remote? The solution to create partnerships between centrally-based NGOs, acting as a philtre for international cooperation, and marginal community groups, is highly risky, as it has been proved for the Kayonza project. The question of how to create networks involving remote civil society groups remains open for discussion.

Differentiating NSAs as a means to empower local agency

During the period of the programme evaluation, some EC delegations involved in the NSA-LA programme invited local stakeholders to participate in civil society forums. The arguments of local agency and partnerships were debated, and strong INGOs were criticized by local NSAs for their paternalistic attitude towards grassroots organisations, and for their business-oriented approach in project implementation. As a matter of fact, during my field work, I met many consultants working for NGOs engaged in projects, highly educated and skilled in diplomatic and business work. Local ac-

tivists revealed that new NGOs were created to respond to the new funding opportunities.

As a response to this criticism, some INGOs ensured that in their plans they would need to boost the numbers of local employees and that capacity building activities would be included in their projects to favour local empowerment.

However, the evidence of the hegemonic role of INGOs has recently caused an important change in the EU strategy. To decrease the influence of European NGOs and ensure effective support to local actions, it has been decided that Southern partnerships can be granted directly, without any Northern NSA necessarily involved. Concord (2009: 2), the European NGO confederation for relief and development, reacted with a letter claiming the important role that INGOs play in development:

"European civil society organizations (CSOs) were founded in the spirit of North-South solidarity, poverty reduction, empowerment and non-profit interests. We work together as members of international advocacy network to influence decision-makers on global issues (…). Synergy and solidarity between Southern and Northern NGOs should be supported. Rather than exacerbating the competitive environment, we would welcome dialogue on new approaches to reward learning, sharing and capacity building. European CSOs have learnt the value and impact of investing in capacity-building with Southern partners to support dialogue with the EC, other donors and their governments".

According to Concord, INGOs' role is to upscale local causes and to activate international interest on them. Also at the local level, INGOs consider that their own disempowerment would not facilitate the entrance of new and weaker actors (e.g. from remote, vulnerable areas or representing minorities) in the programme and that it would cause a higher competitive, rather than supportive, environment. Indeed, as we have seen in the two Rwandan cases, neither foreign NGOs did necessarily cause failures in the expression of grassroots initiatives, nor was participation of national actors a guarantee *per se* of local ownership of the action.

These considerations help to go beyond a superficial vision of NSA partnerships and to overcome the simplistic dichotomy that differentiates local from international NSAs. It is evident that the NSA category is too broad and undefined, and that even within the group of development NGOs

there are very diverse associations, more or less related to local communities. In a parallel study undertaken for the EC, Floridi et al. (2009) propose a structural analysis of NSAs into 4 groups, namely: 1) grassroots organizations; 2) associations with simple structure, statute, legal recognition and focus (e.g. cultural, local development, professional); 3) corporate associations provided of central headquarters and local branches; and, on the top, 4) international coalitions. Grassroots organizations are described as being provided with substantial community-based knowledge, social mobilization's capacity, but poorer organization, often lacking access to information and financial means. On the other hand, other competences are recognized as belonging to NSAs at the intermediate and higher structural levels: advocacy and political influence, operational and financial capacity, networking etc. These requisites become stronger, going up to higher structural levels, while local agency and ownership progressively decrease.

This structural analysis opens new potentials. It helps elaborating guidelines to support fair partnerships between NSAs of different structural levels and to prioritize actions where local agency is ensured by the presence of grassroots organisations and focus on social learning and empowerment.

Some relevant attempts have been made by EC delegations to address this goal. In the OPT, where EC funding was widely granted to fourth-level NSAs, the EC delegation introduced a new mechanism in project budgets: a window of sub-grant components to be disbursed by the coordinating NSAs to first-level organizations through microtenders. However, according to some local activists, these tenders should remain under the competence of the EC delegations. Otherwise they further increase the power of strong NGOs that become project selectors and distributors of funds. In fact, coordinating NGOs were often considered as donors by the recipient groups. In any case, the EC delegation could not take this task for reasons of work overload and poor cost-effectiveness of an activity that required careful selection procedures for small disbursements. Similar problems occurred in another EU programme, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR): grassroots organizations were involved as 'informal partners' and were not asked to satisfy the same eligibility criteria as the formal applicants, which shall assume financial and accounting liability for all expenses incurred by the infor-

mal partners. This mechanism allowed EC funding to reach community-based groups, but did not guarantee their freedom of utilization without prior negotiation with the leading NGO. Another relevant attempt was made in Cameroon, through a project aiming to civil society structuring, funded by the European Development Fund (EDF). The project organizes training in operational and financial management and project writing, helps the participant organizations in getting a formal status so as to become eligible for funding, and launches simplified calls for small-scale initiatives. This is an appreciated activity, though it only supports administrative skills, thus reflecting a bureaucratic approach in solving constraints of local agency.

The question is, are pre-stated guidelines for new calls for proposals suitable means to stop hegemonic partner relations? In a field where information, financialization and professionalization are fundamental assets, and where cultural influences inevitably pass through the working practices, is it realistic to think that community-based groups involved in project implementation maintain their social capital intact, or is there a risk of internal disempowerment (Holland & Skinner 2008)? These issues remain open for discussion, and new ideas are needed.

Conclusions

This article has addressed various issues related to aims, practice and effectiveness of the European NSA-LAs funding programme; the role of granted NSAs in it, and their accountability towards civil society, public authorities and donors. The focus was mainly on NGOs agency, since other NSAs and also LAs had a marginal involvement in the NSA-LA programme at the time of the study. Moreover, the paper has presented several constraints that impede effective financial support to civil society's initiatives in the fields of poverty alleviation and democratic participation. Based on critical theories and field analysis, it has highlighted unbalanced relations in multi-partnerships in favour of strong NGOs, and their causes. Some project documents have been de-constructed and confronted with the interests of interviewees met in the project areas. In some cases, it was clear that external NGOs were coordinating actions and implementing policies that were designed outside the target communities.

The poor accessibility of new and vulnerable actors to this programme is a key issue that requires specific attention. The hegemonic role that strong NSAs acquire through project grants, despite their earlier distance from the beneficiaries, is based upon two misleading ideas regarding NSAs. The first is that any registered NSAs can represent the civil society, express its needs and plans, and pledge for funding on behalf of it. In the best case reported in this article, the coordinating NGO supported ideas of a local group but was not representing it in front of either the EC delegation, or the public authorities; this distinction made the action sustainable and clearly owned by the active group. The second misconception is that NSAs, although forming a differentiated group, have uniform development missions. In fact, development practitioners have the tendency to treat NSAs as they were forming a monolithic body. On the contrary, they present a world of very diverse organizations, with different thematic aims and levels of structural complexity (Floridi et al. 2009); different interests towards civil society and local agency; and different attitudes towards social learning in development action (Foley 1999). Each actor has specific needs, points of strength and interests, and therefore should be targeted in a more differentiated, demand-based way.

In many observed cases, the involvement of strong NSAs was rather unbalanced as it reproduced north-south, urban-rural relations of power, and did not allow local groups to use their own capacities and assets. In general, community-based organizations are vastly under-represented in the current implementation mechanisms of the NSA-LA programme. They have enormous potential in terms of respect for civil society's identities, social capital and local livelihood assets and can provide solid background for sustainable planning. However, their initiatives have not been sufficiently supported, because of practical difficulties to convert them into a successful project format. The current funding mechanisms are not suitable for local groups and often suffocate community initiatives. The paper has identified various bottle-necks and also some solutions applied by the EC delegations. Other constraints are caused by insufficient evaluations of ongoing projects. While monitoring reports carefully inform about work plans and budget expenditures, they often neglect local impacts and sustainability factors. Community participation and equity across the overall project cycle should be evaluated by participatory appraisals with the beneficiary groups (i.e. IIED 2006). In some observed cases, like in the Kayonza project, paternalistic relations engaged by external NGOs and situations of subjection of weaker partners could be clearly recognised, would donors pay evaluation visits to the project sites, also in remote areas.

A more coherent selection process of proposals should be operated, in line with the set priorities of *local agency*. The civil society's *right of initiative* should not be stopped for required alignment with EC parameters of either bureaucratic or thematic nature. Stronger weight should be given to ideas coming from local groups, rewarding their engagement and social rooting, no matter their informal status or poor financial wealth, which are the current discriminating factors. The current competitive criteria based on the NSA's operational and financial capacity, previous experience in international projects, work plan, budget formulation and short term deliverables, make projects a product of the *aid industry* and not for communities; they therefore reward the most competitive groups instead of the more needy and deprived ones. Different funding mechanisms for different types of NSAs might pose a possible strategy, and the EC should make a choice by using this specific NSA-LA programme to prioritize community local knowledge and agency by giving support to their ideas. Participatory appraisals should be utilized to evaluate the project impacts; periodical stakeholders' dialogue in the fields and visits to the project sites by the EC officers in the delegations should enter in their working routine. This was also the wish of the interviewed EC personnel, who found it difficult to familiarize with their projects only through activity and budget reports. This approach would be more coherent with the idea of projects as learning environments: not only for local civil society organizations, but for all parties involved.

NOTES

[1] Differences with other countries in Latin America and Asia, visited by the other members of the review team, were even stronger. A summary report and different thematic annexes were produced. The report was published online and presented in a public forum, to allow stakeholders to discuss the findings. This was a good opportunity to collect very valuable feedback to be incorporated into the final report (McCormick et al. 2009).

² The NSA-LA programme has different sub-areas, responding to 3 main objectives: 1) support to development actions; 2) promoting education for development in the EU, and 3) development of networks in EU countries. The second and third sub-areas are out of the scope of this study. The first sub-area includes either multi-country or in-country initiatives, but this article will only consider the in-country sub-programme that involves the largest funding share and is central to the topics discussed. This sub-programme is managed by the EC delegations in developing countries and has gained increasing popularity in the beneficiary countries for being one of the few funding mechanisms theoretically accessible to NGOs.

³ The political implications and reactions that this direct cooperation entails, though relevant, cannot be discussed here.

⁴ My visit had a different purpose, since it was made in the framework of the overall NSA-LA programme assessment.

REFERENCES

Baillie Smith M & Jenkins K 2011. Disconnections and exclusions: professionalization, cosmopolitanism and (global?) civil society. *Global Networks* 11: 2, 160–179. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1471-0374.2011.00317.x.

Casson MC, Della Giusta M & Kambhampati US 2009. Formal and informal institutions and development. *World Development* 38: 2, 137–141. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.worlddev.2009.10.008.

Concord – Confederation européenne del ONG d'urgence et le développement 2009. Evaluation of EC aid delivery through civil society organisations: Response from Concord. Funding development and relief working group (written document, unpublished). February 2009, Bruxelles.

Cooke B & Kothari U 2001. *Participation: the new tyranny?* Zed Books, London.

Desai V 2008. The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Desai V & Potter RB (eds). *The companion to development studies*, 525–529. 2nd ed. Hodder Education, London.

Dowie M 2009. *Conservation refugees. The hundred-year conflict between global conservation and native peoples*. The MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Escobar A 1995. *Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

EC (European Commission) 2007. Thematic programme. Non state actors and local authorities in development. Strategy paper 2007–2010. <http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/civil-society/documents/nsa_la_strategy_paper_2007_2010_en.pdf> 8.12.2012.

Floridi M, Sanz Corella B & Verdecchia S 2009. *Etude de capitalization des programmes d'appui au ren-

forcement des capacities des acteurs non etatiques sous le 9ème FED*. EC/IBF, Bruxelles.

Foley G 1999. *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*. Zed Books, London.

Green GP & Haines A 2012. *Asset building and community development*. 3rd ed. Sage, Los Angeles.

Harvey D 2005. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Hintjens HM 1999. Explaining the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37: 2, 241–286. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017%2FS0022278X99003018.

Holland D & Skinner D 2008. Literacies of distinction: (Dis)Empowerment in social movements. *Journal of Development Studies* 44: 6, 849–862. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080%2F00220380802058180.

Holmén H 2009. *Snakes in paradise: NGOs and the aid industry in Africa*. Kumarian Press, Sterling.

IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development) 2006. Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communication. *Participatory Learning and Action* 54, London.

Kinzer S 2008. *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's rebirth and the man who dreamed it*. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.

Levinsohn J 2003. The World Bank's poverty reduction strategy paper approach: Good marketing or good policy? *G-24 Discussion Paper Series* 21. UNCTAD, New York and Geneva.

McCormick D, Rambaud Y & Minoia P 2009. Midterm review of the EC thematic programme "Non State Actors and Local Authorities in Development". Technical report. <http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/files/europa_only/consultation_non_state_actors_main_report.pdf> 8.12.2012.

McEwan C 2009. *Postcolonialism and development*. Routledge, New York.

Minoia P & Guglielmi F 2008. Social conflict in water resource management and environmental impacts in South-Eastern Tunisia. In Efe R, Cravins G, Öztürk M & Atalay I (eds). *Natural Environment and Culture in the Mediterranean Region*, 257–270. Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle upon Tyne.

NWC 2012. Nyamirambo Women's Centre. <http://www.nwc-kigali.org/> 8.12.2012.

Robbins P 2004. *Political ecology*. Blackwell, Hong Kong.

Scoones I 1998. Sustainable rural livelihoods. A framework for analysis. *IDS Working Paper* 72. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Sparke M 2006. Political geography: political geographies of globalizations (II) – governance. *Progress in Human Geography* 28, 357–372. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/0309132506ph606pr.

Swyngedow E 2007. Dispossessing H2O. In Heynen N, McCarthy J, Prudham S & Robbins P (eds). *Neoliberal environments. False promises and un-

natural consequences, 51–62. Routledge, New York.

UN (United Nations) 2000. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 18 September 2000. 55/2. United Nations Millennium Declaration. *<http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>* 9.12.2012.

UN (United Nations) 2002. Johannesburg Summit 2002. *<http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/>* 9.12.2012.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 2002. *Human development report 2002. Deepening democracy in a fragmented world.* UNDP, New York.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 2012. The Millennium Development Goals. *<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview.html>* 9.12.2012.

Welch G & Nuru Z (eds) 2006. *Governance for the future: Democracy and development in the least developed countries.* UNDP, New York.

Williams G 2004. Evaluating participatory development: tyranny, power and (re)politicization. *Third World Quarterly* 25: 3, 557–578.

Willis K 2005. *Theories and practices of development.* Routledge, New York.