**Bachelor Thesis – Public report**

# Civil society in the EU-Development Cooperation A theoretical concept and its practical implication in Rwanda. An illustrative Case Study

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## Abstract

The term civil society has long entered the discourse of development cooperation and is hereby often seen as a guarentee to achieve democracy and justice. This thesis analyzed how the theoretical concept, which has its roots in the western philosophy, is incorporated in the European Union's development policies and where it experiences difficulties in adaption to non-western contexts. A theoretical framework of viewing civil society from a threefold perspective, will not only help to classifiy scientific definitions of the terms but also to systematize the definitions provided by the European Union. It will guide the whole thesis in structuring the different views and the criticism made on the use of civil society in development cooperation along those lines. In its empirical part, the work will focus on the case of Rwanda, a post-conflict, developing country, and will analyze how the country's civil society can be viewed and how the EU is cooperating with it through its mechanisms at hand. This will allow in the end to answer the research question how the EU uses the concept of civil society in its development cooperation and how successful the concept can be in a country like Rwanda.

# 1. Introduction to the Topic

Civil society – a term which is often used and read but what it actually implies is very difficult to find out. Not only for the lay-men but also for scholars who have been engaged with the topic throughout their whole career. The search for a definition of civil society is described by scholars as the attempt to *"nail a pudding to the wall"* (Kocka, 2006, p.37)[1] and hence a very difficult if not impossible task. The main problem is that the term inherits descriptive as well as normative elements, which from the starting point on "*exclude a purely empirical use of the concept*" (Freise, 2004, p. 41).

Despite the recognition of the difficulty to operationalize the term of civil society it has gained a lot of prominency during the last years and is especially used in empirical contexts. One of them is the European Union.[2] Here it does not only play a role in the governance within the European Union and is seen as a way to increase the EU's legitimacy and fight its democratic deficit, but it has also gained importance concerning EU foreign policies, especially development policy. The strengthening of civil society actors is seen in this context as an automatism to ensure democratisation, stability and control of strong states. The term civil society in this particular and in many other policy-fields has long become a "*buzzword*" (Freise, 2008, p.24) which has to be used when applying for research grants or for EU –funds.

A lot of research has been made about the role civil society can play within the European Union and how it should be viewed and constituted. As will be shown in chapter three, there is also a vast of literature available concerning the applicability of the concept of civil society in the context of development policy. However, there is a lack of academic work when looking at the actual use of the concept in the EU's development cooperation.

Development cooperation in general has changed its approach since more than a decade. Signed in 2000 the Cotonou Agreement, which has already experienced some revisions, emphasizes the principle of participation of Non-State Actors in development cooperation as one of the most striking changes (European Commission, 2010b). This has been re-confirmed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008 (High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, 2008). As a successor of the Lomé Agreement, Cotonou has "*given greater prominence to the political dimension*" (Crawford, 2007, p.72).

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[1] This comparison is also the title of an article of Micha Brumlik, namely "*What is civil society? The attempt to nail a pudding to the wall*" (Author's translation) (Brumlik, 1991)

[2] Another example is the Civil Society Index as established by CIVICUS which assesses the strength and performances of civil society in 75 countries in four dimensions (structure, values, space and impact) through the use of a Civil Society Diamond (Anheier, 2004)

The Cotonou Agreement also guides, as a legal basis, the EU develeopment cooperation (Europeaid, 2013)[3]. Here the emphasis of the necessary involvement of civil society actors has increased steadily throughout the last years. It seems of great importance to look at how civil society actors are involved in the practical application of EU development cooperation, since the EU is one of the largest donors worldwide with 55% of all ODA coming from the European Union (COM, 2006b, p.1). The recognition that the main aim of EU's development cooperation − namely the eradication of poverty through the achievement of the Millenium Development Goals - cannot be achieved solely by providing money but that the population in the target countries has to be actively involved in the changes − also of structures − in the country to make the transition sustainable (COM, 2011, p.5) seems especially relevant and makes it necessary to take a closer loook at how the population is actually involved.

The thesis at hand will systematise the definitions the European Union provides of civil society and the statement it makes about the necessity of its involvement. On the basis of one particular case, Rwanda, and one particular instrument, the Non-State Actors/Local Actors programme, it will analyse how the theoretical definitions formulated on the EU level are actually applied in the practical cooperation and what problems may arise. Hereby the thesis will be guided by the following research questions: *i) How does the EU apply the concept of civil society in its development cooperation and  ii) How successful is the concept in a post-conflict African State?* In order to be able to answer these questions the questions will be specified in two hypotheses each. The structure will be as follows:

Before analyzing EU's definition of civil society a theoretical approach will be chosen. The three-fold approach by Kocka (Kocka, 2006) seems appropriate to first systematize existent academic definitions (2.1) and subsequently look at the definitions provided by the European Union. Here it is − after Kocka − distinguished between civil society as a societal sphere located between but connected to the market, state and private sphere, civil society as a type of social action and civil society as utopia. Subsequently the role civil society plays within the EU in its governance framework will be looked at. Afterwards the EU's definition and its normative claim of what civil society should achieve are the focus of analysis.

The third chapter will look at potential problems concerning the applicability of the concept of civil society. The possibility to use this "*normative concept with universalistic claims and an exclusive reality*" (Reichhardt, 2004, p. 46) in non-western contexts is heavily debated. In

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[3] See herefore the Homepage of Europeaid: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/acp/overview/cotonou-agreement/cotonou_programming_en.htm

the first part of the chapter the general debate on the applicability will be outlined. The second part will especially identify potential problems that may arise in applying the concept in development cooperation. At the end of the third chapter four hypotheses will be formulated, which will be tested in the empirical case study.

The fourth chapter will outline the reasons for chosing the methodological approach of a case study. Here the fact that the author has – due to various stays in the country – gained in-depth insights into the Rwandan society plays a huge role. Her work with both, civil society organizations as well as the European Union Delegation allow her to profit from the acquired knowledge for the emprical part of this work. Apart from distinguishing the case study from other method, the limits and potentials of this methodological approach will be shown. The structure of the case study's design will function as a framework for the subsequent analysis of Rwanda.

After a brief overview of the country's history and its link to civil society, the current state of civil society in the country will be outlined. Subsequently the work of the EU Delegation in the country will be described, here theoretical definitions as provided in the EC Communications are compared with the practical adaption.

The data on which the case study is based derives from various sources, namely two interviews, the analysis of a project on citizens participation, implemented in partnership between the Irish NGO "*Trocaire*" and three local partners as well as literature and mapping studies about the current state of civil society in Rwanda. This variety of data allows to test the four hypothess which are formulated at the end of the third chapter on the basis of a stable foundation. However, due to the method chosen and the specificities of the case, no general verifications or falsifications will be possible. Notwithstanding, the final chapter will summarize the findings, answer the research questions and consolidate the hypotheses. Moreover questions which could be adressed in further research will be outlined.

## 2. Conclusion and Findings of the thesis

The thesis at hand analyzed how the concept of civil society is applied in the EU development cooperation and how successful it can be in a country like Rwanda, where primordial structures still play an important role. The use of Kocka's (Kocka, 2006) theoretical framework which distinguishes between three spheres of civil society, turned out to be very useful in order to systematize firstly existent scientific definitions and subsequently definitions the European Union provides of the concept. The definitions of civil society within and outside the EU did not show significant differences. It was identified that – especially in

the field of development cooperation- civil society is characterized as independent from the state, a type of voluntary action and a pursue of common interests. Furthermore it is directly linked with normative visions of what civil society should achieve, namely the promotion of democracy, an accountable state and the eradication of poverty.

Besides the three spheres of civil society, two important pre-requisites for effective civic engagement were identified: The existence of an enabling environment as well as the capacity of an organization to articulate its needs and to get engaged in policy debates. The main points of criticism made on the use of the concept in a non-western context were outlined and were incorporated in the analysis of the case study in the empirical part.

The case study methodology which was used in this thesis does not allow to verify or falsify the outlined hypotheses, however conclusions can be drawn and the assumptions made can be solidified.

The analysis of the case of Rwanda, guided by the research questions and by the theoretical framework and based on document analysis, project analysis and interviews, revealed that the problems that arise in the application of the concept rather refer to the practical incorporation of the concept in development cooperation than to the concept as such. Here the first research question, how the EU uses the concept of civil society in its development cooperation was specified into two hypotheses. It was analyzed which kind of organizations actually benefit the EU support and how they are selected. The focus on one specific programme makes it impossible to state the general assumption that the EU always works together with easy accessible and already skilled NGOs. Notwithstanding; in the specific case of the grant awarding in Rwanda under the NSA/LA programme it was shown, how mainly already established organizations which enjoy a certain level of trust by the Delegation succeed in the application process. Furthermore the restricted application process in which inexperienced CSOs can almost not participate and the increased focus on advocacy organizations by the Delegation, also showed a self-selection mechanism, making it very difficult for not yet skilled organizations to be seen by and to succeed in Delegation's competitive grant awarding procedures. What was identified as an interesting question for further research in this context is, to what extent capacity building and this self selection mechanism could be alleviated by international NGOs which increasingly implement projects in cooperation with local CSOs. As shown in the sample project on Citizen's Participation, implemented by Trocaire in partnership with three Rwandese Organizations, the skills already acquired by the

international NGOs can profit local organizations which themselves may share them with smaller CBOs or grass root organizations.

When looking at the potential successfulness of the concept the interim balance is rather positive. Not only can it prove to be a useful tool to strengthen local participation structures but also does its application in practice take place in a more flexible and open way than initially assumed. In a country like Rwanda, where participation is mainly associated with non-voluntary, state-initiated forms of engagement (*Umuganda* and *Gacaca*) the concept can prove to be a useful tool to first identify such facts and secondly to formulate projects aiming at the sensibilisation of the population. As shown in the sample project of Trocaire the cooperation with state institutions and the taking into consideration of the country specific context is an indispensable factor of success. The project in fact managed to increase citizen awareness of their rights and appreciation of participation by authorities.

When analyzing the adaptation difficulties the concept may experience it became clear that the concept of civil society is not at all designed to function as a blueprint to be used in any kind of social context. It is in practice rather implemented in a flexible and open way, functioning more as a general framework than as some static construct. This follows scholars such as Lewis (2002) who outline the function of civil society as a means to "*inspire action*" (Lewis, 2002, p.570).

Here the absence of a written definition of civil society adjusted to the context of Rwanda is not necessarily an evidence of the problematic application of the concept. Cooperation takes place in a way which is not in fact oriented along the theoretical concept of civil society. This, however, offers a very open and flexible use of the concept. In fact it comes back to the responsible people occupying positions such as the civil society Focal Point and their devotion to their work. The identification of civil society in a country takes time and the huge variation of people being part of this sphere, their different backgrounds to be considered and the power structures have to be realized at first. The risk of favoring certain organizations and groups and reproduce existing power structures always remains, and is not a specific problem of the concept of civil society. Here it is more about an understanding of the country in general and the dissociation of the utopia connected to the use of civil society as promoting democracy.

In the practice of EU cooperation the concept looses a lot of its theoretical roots, also the normative vision connected to it is in fact not reproduced this strongly.[4] The launch of a call

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[4] This becomes clear in conversations and interviews lead for this thesis.

for proposal under a mechanism for civil society cooperation does not imply that in reality the definition outlined in this programme is transferred in all its dimensions, adaptions are made constantly and since these are taking place rather un coordinated it might be described by some as careless (Hearn, 1997, p.3). What it reveals is that the critics outlined in the debate on the usefulness of the concept of civil society in a non-western context especially in the context of development cooperation should focus on the use of the concept as such. Rather than theoretizing over the general African context, case studies and directly applied observations seem more useful. As shown in the case of Rwanda, donors and civil society organizations are in most cases fully aware of the country specific characteristica. Problems that are faced in the practice of development cooperation concern mainly the high bureaucratic barriers and the preference to work with easy accessible NGOs. The potential impact a mapping study and a higher funding for less skilled and rural based CSOs can have remains a question to be explored. Here a comparison could be useful, looking at a country where the EU has made a mapping study and comparing it with the case of Rwanda to analyze the difference. Furthermore the cooperation between Northern and Southern CSOs could be an interesting topic for further research asking for the potential of those cooperations to enhance capacity. The importance of the interaction between the state and civil society and the determining role the state in fact has over a country's civil society can be an interesting topic of analysis. Here a comparison along the lines weak-strong civil society and lean to hard state could bring interesting results in showing if and if yes to what extent the donor's cooperation with civil society does make a difference at all or if in the end it all comes back to the state and its willingness to accept the necessity of civil society.

How then should a map for the aid industry be designed, to impede the bulldozer – as described by Edwards (2009) – to destroy all local structures? As shown on the basis of one exemplary case, there is no general map that can be drawn. The aid industry, in this specific case Europeaid, will remain to be guided by general programmes and assumptions about civil society. What remains the responsibility of the people "on the spot" is to listen to, work with and meet with the people and draw their own map of important structures to be kept in mind. This is not only indispensable in the context of a frequent rotation taking place in the EU Delegations, but also to allow for a more systemating involvement of civil society actors. In the end the map should become superfluos since the citizen's of the respective country's themselves take over.

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