Challenges to Normative Power Europe in the Mediterranean
Impact on Arab civil societies and the role of Islamic donors

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Abstract

What are the challenges the European Union is currently facing in the Mediterranean in the aftermath of Arab uprisings? Literature intensively focused so far on failure of EU’s promotion of norms and values towards this particular area. The added value of this paper is to analyze the main weaknesses of EU’s ideational projection upon its Southern neighbors in a comparative perspective with Arab donors active in the area. Indeed, assuming the Mediterranean as a chessboard for international actors to spread their influence in the region, Gulf countries are considered potential competitors of EU to impact socio-political development. This study focuses in particular on the notion of “civil society assistance” and its conceptualization declined according to different types of donors. On one hand civil society support has always been at the forefront of EU’s activity of democracy promotion in the area and one of the core issues of Normative Power Europe theory; on the other hand Islamic donors are increasingly diffusing their presence in the region through a peculiar attention to certain sectors and actors of civil society which are part of an intense network of civic activism. These different mechanisms of diffusion subsume different interpretations about the nature and role of civil society conceived by different donors, thus entailing a scenario of clash of norms and values. Which donor could have a more effective penetration on the ground? Eventually, the ultimate scope of this research, still under scrutiny, is to understand the qualitative relationship between different donors’ idea of civil society, depending on donors’ culture identity and the potential dynamics of Arab civil society’s activism.
I Introduction

What is the impact of the diffusion of a certain idea? This is the general research question guiding this study. The diffusion of ideas has become a central research theme in political science and other disciplines. In studying how ideas are spread across time and space, scholars have focused on several questions: under which conditions does diffusion occur, what are the mechanisms of diffusion and how diffusion affects political, social, cultural, legal and economic conditions (Borzel and Risse 2012). In particular, Normative Power Europe theory stresses the uniqueness of EU, deriving from its “historical context, hybrid polity and political-legal constitutions”, predisposes it to act in a ‘normative way’ beyond its borders (Manners, 2002).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, democracy promotion and civil society assistance of Eastern Europe countries became the forerunner of EU’s normative projection in the world. Thus, civil society activism was seen as a triumph for the values of liberal democracies and was crucial in popularizing the view that democracy promotion strategies should be built on strengthening civil society activism in authoritarian countries (Cavatorta, 2011). If EU’s democracy promotion has been considered a success story in the post-soviet space, several scholars have instead questioned the effectiveness of EU’s democracy promotion towards the Mediterranean region since its establishment with the Barcelona Process in 1995 (Pace 2009; Balfour 2012; Santini 2013).

Literature underlines the scarce effectiveness of the EU due to a top-down and exclusive approach of civil society promotion, which does not take into account local needs and grassroots traditions. As a matter of fact, EU-supported civil society actors coexist with a wide range of Islamic associations which are neglected by European programmes of civil society assistance, yet they enjoy a high level of popular support due to their welfare activities. As a result, NGOs supported by the EU lack horizontal ties with other groups of civil society and they are detached from their constituencies, thus limiting the impact of foreign assistance.

Assuming the Mediterranean as a “chessboard” for international actors to spread their influence in the region, Islamic donors (here intended as Gulf countries) might be potential competitors in influencing civil societies and in broader terms, socio-political development of EU’s Southern Neighbourhood. Indeed, the underlying hypothesis is that Islamic donors policies vis-à-vis civil society actors might be more effective than Western donors, because they are vehicle of a different idea of civil society which is likely to have a stronger impact on the ground. A preliminary investigation on Islamic donors shows their capacity to project their ideas through a network of Islamic charities which are likely to attract a greater popular support and activate social activism.
II Theoretical framework: civil society as an idea

The concept of civil society is relevant as an object of scientific inquiry and also as it is the motivation of a large “aid industry” (Van Rooy, 1998; Challand, 2005). Various studies highlight that funding mechanisms, despite their apparently technical outlook, are never truly neutral, yet donors deploy an idea of their implementation (Van Rooy, 2008; Fioramonti, 2012; Challand, 2014). This study indeed investigates the ideational impact of different types of donors vis-à-vis Arab civil societies. Then, the notion of civil society is used in this research as an analytical tool in the study of Western and Arab world. Put in other terms, the goal of this study is to look at civil society promotion through the prism of culture, making a link between different types of foreign aid and different conceptualizations of the notion of “civil society”, which is likely to imply a different impact upon a non-Western context.

While the EU approach is firmly rooted in the dominant liberal conceptualization of civil society, it leads to the questions regarding the “normativity” that is implicit in the use and application of the term (Cavatorta, 2011). The rise of classical liberal economic brought a fundamental turn in the ruling social order and the respective disintegration of the terms “civil society” and “state” (Edwards, 2004: p. 7). This division between state and civil society in Western political thought entails in practice an identification of civil society as necessarily opposed to the state. Accordingly the existence of civil societal organizations (CSOs) such as unions, associations, voluntary organizations, professional groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is considered to guarantee a check on the state and on its possible undemocratic attitudes. Indeed CSOs are ultimately assumed to be carriers of virtue (Carothers, 2000). In other words, they are expected not to have vested interests and to be able to promote pressure more effectively from below. To this, EU adds a robust argument on the interlink between democracy and civil society. Civil society organizations are ultimately seen as vehicle of democracy.

When it comes to the MENA region, the mainstream assumption is that countries of this geographical area are crucially lacking civil society activism and that if it was strengthened we would see more decisive moves toward democratization. However, liberal approach to civil society severely limits the analysis of political reality on the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed several scholars expressed doubts about the transfer of the Western civil society concept to non-Western societies. Van Rooy talks about the notion of civil society as an idea developed over the history (Van Rooy, 1998). According to this argument, civil society was born out of the historical specificities of 18th century Europe and cannot be easily transferred.
Then, the concept needs to be adjusted to locally-specific traditions. This may include widening the concept of civil society in order to include involuntary relations that play a vital role in these countries. Indeed, some authors underline the fact that there is a civil society in many of the Middle Eastern states but Western categories limit their perceptions (Norton, 1995, Challand, 2005; Pace 2009). In other words civil society in the modern western liberal politics is different from that taking place in the Arab Mediterranean. Some Arab writers have questioned the appropriateness of Western definition of civil society for the Arab-Muslim context, arguing that they exclude both religious local actors and tribal or communal entities, which are actually the principal pillars of civil societies in non-western countries (Al-Sayyid, 1995, Bishara, 1997, Howell and Pearce, 2001). Arab sociologists show that there is an Arab-Muslim civil society where most organizations are based on voluntary participation and many are inspired by religious beliefs (Norton, 1995; Gahlou, 2000). However, Islamic circles are totally impermeable to Western civil society promotion as they have a political agenda at odds with Western donors (Challand, 2005). Then, civil society activism in the Mediterranean region cannot be really understood if we exclude the contribution of Islamism (Browers, 2006; Cavatorta 2005). Labelling Islamism a priori as uncivil does not give justice to the variety of movements that operate within the sphere of civil society and does not reflect the diverse approaches to civil society that Arab political thought presents (Carothers, 2000; Cavatorta, 2010).

Then, the notion of civil society is here analysed as a socio-political construct, open to different conceptualizations. Indeed, civil society is in itself a neutral concept and can consist of actors that can be both noble and evil (Behr and Siitonen, 2013). Constructivist theories subsume this argument stressing the role of ideas at transnational level. This research in particular claims that different frames of this multidimensional concept are likely to have an impact at societal level. Social movements theories well explain these implications. Thus, this research is built on the attempt to merge constructivist theory of international relations and social movement theories. Indeed, if Normative Power Europe, on one hand, describes relatively well the diffusion of EU’s ideas outside its borders, on the other hand it is weak in assessing the nature of recipients’ domestic change. Moreover, theories on diffusion have been successful in including the relational mechanisms between actors embedded in the diffusion process (Borzel and Risse 2009), then they focus on the process of internalization of ideas. However also these theories lack the capacity to analyze the impact of ideational diffusion generated upon the context absorbing the transfer of norms and ideas. Then, the added value of this research is to fill this gap, thus to assess how an idea of civil society assistance conceived by certain donors informs their policies of civil society assistance and finally produces a certain outcome on the ground.
III Research design and Methodology: civil society in a comparative perspective

This working paper is a preliminary theoretical analysis of a broader empirical research on the impact of Western and Islamic donors upon civil societies in some selected countries of the Mediterranean region. Then, as a small contribution it is particular relevant to shed the light upon an academic field which is still underexplored. It consists of two parts. In the first part I investigate to what extent Arab uprisings stimulated the EU to dismiss its old conception of civil society. I first propose an empirical approach to this question, analyzing by a discursive analysis documents issued by the EU in response to the Arab Spring. Secondly, I explore how the EU has tried to translate its discourse into real action. The argument defended is that EU’s narrow conceptualization of civil society is already evident in its declaratory objectives, then it has a direct consequence into an ineffective implementation.

Second part of the research, still under scrutiny, is an analysis of Islamic aid policies, particularly of Gulf countries. Little is known about donorship practices of Gulf countries: existing literature shows that issues on conception, design and implementation are largely similar for almost all Western aid efforts directed at civil society development, whilst is still missing a study on Islamic donors’ mechanisms of aid and their impact on the ground. The lack of analysis of Islamic aid in the literature is indeed unfortunate since Arab donors have a crescent appeal vis-à-vis the MENA region (Villanger, 2007). Preliminary findings deals with the search of a pattern of Arab civil society conception, investigating in what they diverge from the Western counterparts. In this paper in particular I will look at the variety of institutions of Islamic aid, their peculiar funding mechanisms and the analysis of motives behind aid.

To summarize, the ultimate scope of this research is to investigate whether Islamic and EU foreign policies approaching Arab civil societies are set to work in competition. In particular I investigate how Islamic conception of civil society differs in terms of funding mechanisms and selection of local recipients. Indeed, donors’ conceptualization of civil society is empirically traceable by the evidence of a certain typology of local targets. In other words Islamic donors are presented in this research as competitors as they tend to promote a distinct model which seems to be more appealing and effective vis-à-vis local recipients. As mentioned above this working paper has to be read as a preliminary theoretical research, providing a framework of analysis on the role of non-Western donors in a comparative perspective with the EU’s normative power in the Mediterranean. Then, it needs to be integrated by semi-structured interviews addressed to civil society actors which will be obtained during the phase of field research. Far from be exhaustive, however, this study starts to uncover the veil of Islamic actors activities out of any normative assumption.
IV Normative Power Europe. Tracing the diffusion of the EU’s idea of civil society

We understand normative power as the effective capability of an actor to export ideas beyond its borders (Manners, 2002; Johansson-Nogués, 2007). In this section we see how they are expressed and how the EU attempts to diffuse them. Based on Manners’ mechanisms of promotion, we can identify five of them (Manners 2002). First, informational diffusion is clearly present. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Review, A New Response for a Changing Neighbourhood, is one of the first document issued by the EU Commission and the High Representative in the aftermath of Arab uprisings; it repeatedly defines democracy, human rights and rule of law as “universal values”, and stresses the new EU’s approach rewarding those countries showing commitment to these values. To this end, the ENP Review introduced the concept of deep democracy, establishing five core elements that should constitute a “functioning democracy”: free elections, support to civil society, the right to a fair trial, fighting against corruption, and democratic control over armed forces. It seems wise to argue then that ENP makes explicitly clear its normative component linking the notion of civil society to that of democracy. Besides the ENP Review the Commission and the High Representative issued a joint communication, Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PfD) putting civil society support at the heart of the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy in the South. Secondly, a procedural diffusion is also present. The institutionalization of the relationship between EU and its Southern Neighbourhoods is represented in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, 1995), and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM, 2008). These institutional fora present a three-pillar structure, where the ‘Political and Security’ pillar states as primary objective the development of the “rule of law, democracy (…) [and] respect for human rights”. Thirdly, the transference mechanism is found as well in the form of the European Endowment for Democracy, which aims to “bring greater influence and consistency to the efforts of the EU” and to complement other “democratisation tools” already present, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Fourthly, the ENP Review revalorises the cultural filter mechanism, since it emphasizes the direct contact with civil CSOs as a means to diffuse EU’s values. One clear example is the proposed Civil Society Facility, which aim to strengthen the advocacy capacity of civil society actors. Finally, the overt diffusion mechanism also takes place through the rebranded EU Delegations, which are present in the entire region, and through the appointment of a Special Representative for the Mediterranean. Then, we can clearly see how the EU deploys its diffusion arsenal when it comes to promote civil society, based on the assumption that the ‘European model’ of democracy is universally exportable and “what worked for Europe will surely work for the MENA region” (Pace, 2009).
Hence I will proceed to a discourse analysis of aforementioned documents: “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean” and “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood”. At first glance, any word seems to be spent to repair to the mistakes of the past (Teti, 2012). Indeed, through the reiterate use of some key-words, these documents seem to shape a new paradigm oriented in favour of a bottom-up approach based on a better understanding of dynamics of local civil society. Indeed, a Joint Staff Working Document of 2012, reporting the activities undertaken in 2011 states: “Throughout 2011 the EU has provided assistance to countries engaged in democratic transition while acknowledging that democratization must be owned and driven by the people of the countries concerned”.\(^1\)

However, through a more detailed analysis we see that beyond a radical shift in the rhetoric, EU official documents appear too vague, thus unlikely to generate a concrete break with the paradigm of the past (Wetzel and Orbie, 2012). The Communication of March 2011 is the emblematic example of the difficulty of the EU to break free from the entrapment of its old conceptions. As a matter of fact we can notice a persistence of discrepancy between a neoliberal framework and socio-economic rights (Teti, 2012). We can find evidence of the gap between the preamble, including an emphasis on both liberal and social rights, and a second part, including more concrete provisions, where the link to ‘social rights’ simply disappear. A clear example is the concept of ‘social justice’, which is mentioned in the preamble, whereas in the second part is only implicitly considered.

As mentioned above, the reiterated presence of some strategic key-words seems to suggest a shift in the EU’s approach. Indeed, in the text of PfD the role of civil society is mentioned 14 times. However, looking more into details, the emphasis on the ‘supportive’ role of civil society seems to implicitly downgrade civil societies’ actors to retain a passive and marginal role, instead of acting as a proactive facilitators of democracy. Indeed, few sentences extracted from the document seem to confirm this interpretation: “A thriving civil society can help uphold human rights and contribute to democracy building and good governance, playing an important role in checking government excesses”. “A range of non-government (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) can provide much-needed support for the reforms”.\(^2\)

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Moreover, we can find another ‘significant silence’ throughout the analysis of the text, referring to some actors which are implicitly and arbitrarily excluded from the categorization of civil society, such as independent trade unions, non-state linked CSOs acting on labour issues and in particular faith-based organizations. Local trade unions are only mentioned in the last paragraph referring to the ‘Support to the Social Dialogue Forum’ and not linked to the discourse on ‘civil society’. The sole, reference to this category in the paragraphs before refers to ‘European trade unions’ which can ‘offer their expertise’, thus considering again the beneficiaries as passive actors subjected to the active role played by the EU. The detachment of ‘labour organisations’ and ‘trade unions’ from the concept of CSOs shows that the EU is still entrapped in an old logic of narrow understanding of civil society. Moreover, it is also important to note the lack of any reference to faith-based organizations which, as a matter of fact, are pivotal actors of Arab civic activism. Thus, even if this omission does not necessarily mean that these actors cannot be included in the EU programmes of democracy promotion, this disregard is actually quite alarming, as these groups, considered for the major part illegal during the authoritarian regimes, have actually had a crucial role during the uprisings, “presenting a set of political demands around which mobilization occurred (Teti, 2012). Therefore they should deserve a specific place in a document such as the PfD, which has been conceived to ride the democratic wave of the Arab Spring.

Therefore, this disregard for the protagonists of the Arab revolutions determines an unsettling failure of the EU’s policy determinacy in its effort of supporting civil society. Moreover, this omission is going to worsen the situation once we discover that the EU financial support to these ‘social partners’ does not seem to be provided by those instruments which have been specifically conceived to support CSOs, such as the ENPI, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) or the Civil Society Facility. Indeed the document seems to oddly emphasize the funding role of member states instead of the EU: ‘This is an area where we should maximize the assistance that member states, can offer […] to develop a platform for civil society, political parties, trade unions and associations”. As a matter of fact, these specific ‘social partners’ have not been considered so far in the EU annual reviews, where traditional instruments for support to civil society are included. Some words need to be spent also in reference to another relevant text, the document launching the new ENP. Beside the emphasis stressed on its innovation, we need to keep in mind that this document has an undeniable ‘original sin’, as it was not specifically conceived as a response to the Arab Spring, but its drafting was already ongoing during the outbreak of uprisings.3

3 Interview with Horstmann, Consellor at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU, 26 April 2013.
The document launching the renewed ENP is worthy to be mentioned because it reiterated the support to civil society through the launch of the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). If on one hand this could sound interesting, on the other “in searching the 400 pages one finds nothing specific on how these two initiatives would be organized, which one might say is deeply disappointing” (Emerson, 2011). Although these two instruments were defined in further documents, the lack of determinacy on their modes of implementation in a document such as the ‘revision of the ENP’, which should represent the pillar of the EU strategy in the Mediterranean, leaves a large space of ambiguity for diverging interests of member states. Therefore, according to the considerations mentioned above the EU does not discuss what the substance of its civil society promotion exactly is (Herrero, 2009; Wetzel and Orbie 2012). This conceptual vagueness is a symptom that nothing has changed. This ambiguity implies the same old narrow conceptualization of civil society which is likely to have a negative impact on local social activism.

*The EU’s idea of civil society: from theory to practice*

This section is an attempt to empirically trace the impact of the EU’s model of civil society assistance through an analysis of its implementation. In particular I will highlight some exemplary case yet without claiming to be comprehensive. The core financial instrument of the ENP is the ENPI (from 2014 ENI) which mostly funds Annual Action Programmes (AAPs). AAPs “specify the objectives pursued, the fields of intervention, the expected results, the management procedures and the total amount of financing planned. In addition, AAPs contain a description of the operations to be financed, an indication of the amounts allocated for each operation and an indicative implementation timetable”. As they are reframed every here AAPs are particularly useful to assess possible changes of the EU’s action in a certain country.

From an analysis of projects funded by the EU from 2010 to 2013 we cannot see any variation of the EU’s policy of civil society assistance. Taking as example the case of Egypt, one of the country most in need after the revolutions, in 2011 we notice only three projects without any reference to the support of civil society: “Upgrading of Informal Areas in the Greater Cairo Region”, “Trade and Domestic Market Enhancement Programme”, “Energy Sector Policy Support Programme”, whereas

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5 European Commission, Annual Programmes, Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid website.

6 I mainly focused on projects outlined in the AAP rather than on the Action Plan, which is the core document of the ENP. Indeed, the EU-Egypt AP, running from 2007 to 2013 is a “frozen” document which can be modified only every five years on the basis of the decisions taken to reformulate the multiannual financial framework, therefore it cannot effectively respond to new challenges led by the Arab uprisings.
in 2012 we find one project in “Water management”, one in “Vocational education” and training reform and another referring to “Emergency employment investment”. In 2013 we register a project called “EU Rural Development”. These findings suggest a persistence of a narrow conceptualization of civil society.

Some words need also to be spent in reference to the new programmes launched with the Joint Communications of March and May 2011, the Civil Society Facility for the Neighbourhood and the SPRING Programme. According to some analysts even after the launch of these programmes the ENP rests “awfully unfunded” (Isaac, 2012). Indeed, the Spring Programme offered 350 million from 2011 to 2012\(^8\) and the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility €22 million from 2011 to 2013 which need to be shared among all the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood engaged in the transition.\(^9\) Therefore, notwithstanding the EU’s effort to undertake specific measures to target the new issues raised with Arab uprisings, the action appeared really weak if contextualized to the needs of each country. Moreover, until 2012 amounts were similar to those allocated in 2010, with EU priorities on energy security, investments and trade rather than on democracy promotion. Thus we cannot fine any trace of projects funded by an instrument that has been established by the EU to respond to the Arab Spring. Finally from the end of 2013 we started to see a first change with an amount of 90 million EUR allocated for socio-economic development and civil society support under the umbrella of SPRING Programme.\(^{10}\) However, the renewal of EU approach seems to be very slow.

What kind of civil actors are EU’s targets? Here the analysis is oriented to understand the quality of EU’s civil society assistance. Switching to the Project Grants for CSOs only data available are those of 2011.\(^{11}\) Also here findings are quite emblematic as in Egypt we can find seven projects in the sector of ‘Government and Civil Society’, however if we narrow down the filters of the research to projects concerning only ‘democratic participation’ we can find only one item.\(^{12}\) Therefore, this is the first element seeming to suggest that the bottom-up approach is quite disregarded by the EU through this instrument. Moreover, if we look at the society contracted we notice that the project is organized by a German consultancy called ‘Democracy Reporting International’ which basically

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8 European Union, EU response to the Arab Spring: the SPRING Programme, MEMO/11/638, Brussels, 27 September, 2011
9 European Union, EU Response to the Arab Spring: the Civil Society Facility, MEMO/11/638, Brussels, 27 September 2011.
11 Source http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/work/funding/beneficiaries
12 European Commission, EuropeAid, Development cooperation project grant listings, 2011.
offers its expertise to carry out “analyses, reports and makes recommendations to the public and policy makers on democratic governance”\textsuperscript{11}. Thus, the unique project oriented to the empowerment of civil society is carried out by a Western consultancy, confirming a logic of top-down approach.

Moving to the analysis of the call for proposals with the EIDHR and NSA-LA we want to assess the concrete commitment of the EU with civil society. The first contradiction here is that effectiveness of these two instruments, specifically conceived to include civil society, is still slowed by their bureaucratic machine (Youngs and K. Brudzinska, 2012). Indeed, many local and grass-roots CSOs refrain to apply because blocked by the complex technicalities of the ‘call for proposals’ procedure. Moreover, the requirement to contribute with a minimum of 10\% of the overall budget is another brake which tends to prevent many weaker local NGOs to apply. Last but not least call for proposals are available only in English, which could be an obstacle undermining the access of Arab grass-roots CSOs. If the EU would engage faith-based grassroots CSOs, indeed this would be an invaluable added value for the declared bottom-up strategy of the EU, which would show its effort to overcome the fears of the past. According to these considerations, it seems that the EU machinery, which should be built specifically to foster the empowerment of civil society, so to enhance a bottom-up approach, rather seems to constitute a closed system only accessible to the most expert Western NGOs. Egypt counts four calls for proposals with NSA-LA, respectively for 2010, 2011 2012 and 2013 thus we did not observe any particular change after the Arab Spring, even if a slight increase needs to be acknowledged from 2011. A timid increase of EU funding from 2011 can be noticed also with EIDHR programme, yet information of the nature of each specific project is not available, therefore we don’t know the characteristics of CSOs engaged.

The EU has approached civil society and impinged upon its nature and functioning in indirect and direct ways. Indirectly, the EU can contribute to democracy and human right promotion through civil society by altering the structure in which CSOs operate, for example by raising the interconnectedness between CSOs and the state on the one hand, and CSOs and the grassroots on the other. Directly, the EU would enhance the agency of CSOs engaged in democracy and human rights promotion. Whatever the actions taken by EU, a narrow conception of civil society has an impact upon the outcome of EU’s civil society assistance. The mode of NGOs empowerment remains flawed, as pivotal actors of Arab civil society are not taken into consideration. Indeed, when EU attempts to strengthen civil society as a means of promoting democracy it concentrates on a very narrow set of organizations: mainly professionalized NGOs dedicated to

\textsuperscript{11} Democracy Reporting International, Support to Democratization in Egypt, see: http: www.democracyreporting.org/programmes/egypt.html
advocacy. Yet, the majority of “democracy groups” funded by EU do not have the legitimacy of constituencies and there is a wide range of other types of organizations, from cultural to religious, which often play a crucial role in political transitions (Carothers, 2000; Challand 2006). Moreover, there is a considerable debate in the field whether NGOs whose work focuses mainly on social issues and services make as much contribution to democracy as those that focus specifically on democracy (Carothers 1999; Pace, 2009).

Therefore, liberal democratic understanding of civil society forms an important part of EU’s concrete policy of civil society assistance and it has an impact upon the effectiveness of the policy of assistance itself (Challand, 2006). In certain cases it might even have negative unintended consequences. Indeed considerable emphasis the EU places on the “watchdog” function of CSOs might also unbalance state-society relations and weaken the credibility of fragile new state institutions. Finally, the EU’s determination to focus its engagement on liberal and Western-style NGOs may inadvertently serve to heighten social fragmentation and increase competition with Islamic NGOs that are more and more active across the region (Behr and Siitonen, 2013).

Moreover, civil society organizations that accept Western donors support often come under suspicion or are seen as less legitimate and authentic than organizations that receive no external support (Al Sayyid, 1995). This is considered to be crucial, as dependency on external funding can negatively affect the internal accountability of an organization (Esman and Uphoff, 1984). Then, paradoxically, Western civil society assistance risks to undermine the legitimacy of organizations it seeks to promote. Finally, civil society in Arab countries can be a source of democratic change, but it is not inherently one. Similarly, the outcome of civil society promotion is not necessarily equivalent to the establishment of a democratic regime. Challand, with his research on Palestinian civil societies demonstrated how donors can indirectly contribute by creating a situation of heteronomy where local actors are not able to define their own priorities but have to follow the conditions and working modalities set up by eternal donors (Challand, 2009).

Furthermore, the overall “new” approach is still built on the concept of “more for more”, alias positive conditionality, which actually is an old top-down instrument used by the EU (Tocci, 2012). This seems to be in contrast with the aim to pursuit a new bottom-up approach based on the ownership and the empowerment of civil society. This strictness of conditionality finally discourage local recipients which prefer to take grants for other donors. Then, at the end of the day the EU promises more than it delivers. This is also due to the same barriers to access. Calls for proposal of the EU continue to be very technical and unavoidably tend to exclude most needing recipients.
In conclusion several studies show that the EU’s heightened interest in its Southern neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has not translated into a real change of policy. On the contrary it has contributed to make it even more difficult to discern a regional strategy amid the fragmentation of initiatives and processes (Bicchi, 2014). Indeed, despite the post-Arab spring rhetoric, EU shows a resistance to change that stands out in an area of ongoing transformation. While the recent policy initiatives are often summarized with the motto “more for more” the picture of the ENP in the post Arab –spring context is rather “less for the same” as the same principles are applied and less funds are disbursed (Bicchi, 2014). While the EU had already abandoned its attempts at region building in the Mediterranean before the Arab uprisings, its response to changes in the area has further weakened its long-term vision for the region, to the point that it is currently questionable whether there is one (Bicchi, 2014). This argument is further supported by the fact that new democracies emerging in the Mediterranean do not seem very alike the European model of democracy desired by the EU. Behr again, insists on this point, claiming that the “EU proto-model of democracy is not the only one” (Behr, 2013), since the new democratizing regimes derive from Islamist movements, which are neglected by the EU.

V Islamic donors in the MENA region. Unexpected competitors?

Alongside the EU and those member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that make up the Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), Arab countries also form an important part of the international donor community particularly engaged in the MENA region. Studying non-Western and in particular Islamic international donors is increasingly relevant to international politics. There are several studies on the impact of Western donors, whilst an analysis on the impact of non-Western Islamic influence at domestic level is still missing. Moreover, there is an emerging literature stressing on Gulf countries progressively spreading their influence in the MENA region through formal and informal means. Thus, this research is focused on Islamic donors as an alternative to Western donors.

From 1990s onwards Islamic donors have gradually assumed a leading political and economic role in Middle East and North Africa (Hanieh, 2011; Burke and Bazoobandi, 2010; Burke, 2010). The role played by Gulf Monarchies singularly, or collectively through their regional organization, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is indeed increasing in the aftermath of the Arab Spring showing a clarity of promptness in strategies and action (Isaac, 2014; Colombo, 2012; Tocci et. al 2012; Talbot, 2012). Indeed, half of Arab development aid flows to the Arab countries of the MENA region (Villanger, 2007). Motives for granting aid or loans have been revolving around investing in
regional stability, enhancing Gulf commercial interests and promoting Islam through large flows of non-official aid. The latter mainly includes Islamist movements and their newly established political parties with their varying degrees of conservatism (Isacc, 2014). Indeed, newly emerging sub-state actors, on top of which were various currents of Political Islam, were approached by these funds in a determined manner to influence the inner processes of transformation (Momani and Ennis, 2012; Tocci et.al., 2012; Hanieh, 2011). Support is mainly distributed by Islamic organizations through alms and voluntary charity. Indeed, this has given rise to a large and a diverse Islamic NGO sector that represent a considerable share of civil society activism in the Muslim world and has often been seen as at odds with western NGOs (Ghandour, 2003).

Increase of aid institutions induced Islamic donors to institutionalize their cooperation by establishing the Coordination Group of Arab aid agencies in 1975, which acts as an umbrella organization for coordinating Gulf aid to the multilateral and bilateral aid institutions (Momani and Ennis, 2012). Thanks to this instrument Islamic donors have made significant advances in coordination at the regional level. In general, the Coordination Group has provided a space to facilitate communication and cooperation among Arab aid agencies, and has largely been praised for its ability to design a clear set of policies and procedures that define best practices in project managements and promote harmonization between members. Arab donors give most of their aid bilaterally, rather than multilaterally, usually in the form of loans (Villanger, 2007). Most important national financial funds are Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD).

What are the main regional funding programmes? Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) was established in 1974 and is situated in Kuwait City (World Bank, 2010). AFESD is the major multilateral Arab aid organization. It gives aid only to Arab countries with the stated purpose of facilitating economic and social development, as well as advancing regional integration among Arab states (World Bank, 2010). Aid provided by the AFESD often takes the form of concessional loans and small technical assistance grants (Shushan and Marcoux, 2011).

A second major organization is the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). The IDB was established in 1975 and is located in Saudi Arabia. The IDB was established to finance economic and social development among member countries, as well as to aid Muslim communities. The IDB emphasizes that all of its activities are conducted in accord with the jurisdiction of the Shari’ah, which strictly bans the practice of interest on financial transactions (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014).

OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), based in Vienna, has been to pursuing developmental aid especially in the South–South solidarity (Shushan and Marcoux, 2011). Most of
OFID’s assistance mostly takes the form of concessional loans for development projects, balance of payment support, and trade financing. It also provides modest grants for technical assistance, food aid, research, and emergency humanitarian relief (World Bank, 2010). While OFID is not an Arab-only organization (6 of its 12 current members are Arab states) contributions from Arab countries account for approximately 65% of OFID’s direct operations account with Saudi Arabia as the largest donor (34.7%) (Zimmermann and Smith, 2011).

The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) promotes sustainable economic development, alleviation of poverty, and provision of support for regional and international development initiatives (World Bank, 2010). The Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) provides loans to governments of developing countries to finance projects. Finally the Arab Gulf Fund for Development (AGFUND) is a regional developmental funding organization based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, under the patronage of HRH Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz, the President of AGFUND. AGFUND works in the field of development at the international level through an effective partnership with the UN, international, regional and national development organizations, public institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations.

**Patterns of Islamic donors. In what they diverge?**

Islamic donors have some of the most well-established aid programs in the world. They are considered a world apart from the point of view of Western donors. It is not only their lack of membership in OECD that has induced suspects in the ‘Western’ observer, but also that their generosity threatens the influence of the DAC group and its neoliberal development model (Villanger, 2007). Indeed, Arab donors, most importantly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, have been among the most generous even in the global standards, with official development assistance (ODA) reaching about 1.5 percent of the combined gross national income (World Bank 2010). Qatar on the other hand became more and more visible in the international aid architecture only in the last decade (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014). During the period 1973-1990, Arab aid as a share of GDP was more than twice the United Nations target of 0.7 percent and five times the average of the OECD-DAC countries. (Shushan and Marcoux, 2011). While flows of Arab aid as a share of GDP decreased from 1990-2008, Arab donors continued to meet the UN target of 0.7% throughout the 1990s, and were almost twice as generous as OECD-DAC donors from 2000-2008 (World Bank, 2010).

About 60 % of national and multilateral Arab aid goes to other Arab countries (Isaac, 2014). Gulf aid has been directed to eight Arab recipient countries in particular: Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen and Sudan (Villanger, 2007). Gulf influence in the MENA region was
evident years before the Arab uprisings (Isaac, 2014). Indeed, statistics show that GCC’s monarchies collectively represented the first regional investor in the Mediterranean region (Isaac, 2014). This economic influence has been translated into a growing ability of the Gulf states to gradually assume a greater political, social and cultural influence in regional politics. In particular cultural and ideational influence is also highlighted by the fact that substantial amounts of the Gulf aid went to countries with a predominant Muslim population (Maestri, 2012). Funds channelled to non-state actors appears as an ordinary feature of Gulf aid flow to Arab MENA. The aim to promote Gulf cultural clout in the MENA region is explained by official and unofficial aid given to socio-cultural organizations.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular are extending their influence in the Muslim world by supporting for example the Organization of the Islamic conference, the non-governmental Rābitah al-‘ālam al-islāmī (Islamic League) and Fiqh Muslim Congress (Maestri, 2012). Because the Arab bilateral donors do not provide detailed information about their assistance, it is difficult to estimate whether their aid relationships with these countries have changed. However, there are indications of increased support to Egypt (primarily by Saudi Arabia), Jordan, Morocco (by GCC) and Tunisia (by Qatar) (Rouis, 2012). Egypt has been the most important strategic target. In particular Elagati highlights how the MB and Salafi parties in Egypt were receiving funds for their charity organizations, websites, TV channels and even electoral campaigns for the 2012 parliamentary elections (Elagati 2013). Moreover in 2011, the AHRF provided $186,237 to Egypt-based organisations, including programmes to encourage youth political engagement, legal assistance to victims of freedom of expression violations, and to strengthen female candidates running for syndicate elections (Isaac, 2014).

Islamic donors have positioned themselves as proponents of the South-South model of aid giving and adhere to international calls for stronger donor-recipient dialogue as a means to improve aid effectiveness (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014). At the bilateral level, funding from Arab donors is increasingly being directed towards poor and lower-middle income countries. In terms of multilateral flows, aid allocated through Arab multilateral institutions has increasingly been allocated on the basis of development needs, with Arab multilaterals focusing nearly two-fifths of financial recourses to IDA-eligible recipients (World Bank, 2010).

In the early years a major part of Arab foreign aid was given as direct grants (van den Boogaerde, 1990). This was in contrast to Western aid which was mostly given as loans or technical assistance tied with conditionality. Van den Boogaerde indeed states that the large grant share reflected a philosophy of making unconditional contributions so that developing countries could develop their
own policies without economic and social pressure. This actually reflects the Islamic philosophy of helping without building in economic returns.

Good governance has been promoted as the main vehicle for achieving development by Western donor agents and the EU has been particularly strict in demanding improvements in governance in order for a country to be eligible for aid. According to Villanger, democracy and governance are not topics that are part of the Arab aid dialogue as Arab donors consider the issues as a responsibility of recipients’ governments. On the other hand corruption and efficiency are areas where it has become important for Arab donors to make progress. Arab donors have supported larger efforts towards aid effectiveness and ‘best practices’ in aid allocation through providing untied aid (Momani and Ennis, 2012).

While many DAC donors such as the EU have historically tied foreign aid to the liberalization of investment law for donor companies, or to the purchase of donor country goods and services, Gulf States have limited the extraction of material gain from aid spending. Indeed, Al-Hamad, the Director General of the Arab Fund and former minister of Finance in Kuwait, stated that Arab donors have always adhered to the principle of non-interference in recipient country policies. He argued that Arab approach is limited to give advice on policy matters when they discover clear failures (Villanger, 2007). Moreover, Al-Hamad stated in addition that many of Arab donors are so against the conditionality approach that they refuse to enter in co-financing schemes with Western donors. They have instead launched their own way of operating (Villanger, 2007) Finally, Abu Dhabi Fund’s annual report states that Arab aid is given to help developing countries to “set up policies for their economic and social development of their own free will outside political and economic pressures” (Van den Boogaerde, 1990). Indeed, Arab donors appear to be historic leaders in providing aid that supports recipient autonomy and interests.

However, while Arab multilateral institutions have tended to provide more comprehensive documentation of aid spending, bilateral aid is characterized by a high opacity (Villanger, 2007; Shushan and Marcoux, 2011). According to Villanger, it is “extremely difficult to get information about the magnitudes, purposes, and usage” of political aid flows (Villanger, 2007). Transparency of bilateral Arab aid is in particular limited by the tendency for Arab donors to make additional aid contributions above and beyond regular aid spending (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014).

This ‘political aid’ (Villanger 2007) differs from politically motivated ‘development aid’, as the latter, while still susceptible to the geo-political interests of donor governments remains geared towards development-based initiatives, whereas political aid, by virtue of being allocated through finance ministries rather than national development funds, may not be explicitly targeted towards
enhancing ‘development’ per se (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014). In addition to state-funded organizations, there is also a substantial grant flow from private donors in Arab countries. Indeed, a series of charitable donations by Gulf countries contributed to the relative ‘fuzziness’ of Arab aid by blurring the lines between public and private spending (Ennis and Momani, 2012).

Southern Mediterranean countries have witnessed the progressive expansion of an Islamic network of Arab Gulf-supported charitable activities in the last decade (Maestri, 2012). Sheik Mohamed, ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the UAE, for example, has ‘personally’ established aid campaigns and has provided several large donations to various initiatives. As a result, the ability to accurately report Arab aid expenditure is further confused, adding to reporting challenges and further hindering the transparency of Arab aid (Clarke, 2006; Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014). Islamic traditions of charitable giving (sadaqa) have existed since the birth of Islam, just as the obligatory alms tax, zakat, and the religious endowment, the waqf, have historically been important Islamic institutions of social welfare (Barnett, 2012). But international Muslim charities, and in general the notion of Islamic aid are a relative new phenomenon, the new vehicle of an Islamic normative discourse. The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIROSA) is the first of them, emerged in 1978 in Saudi Arabia. The second most important charity is the International Islamic Charitable Organization, established in Kuwait in 1984. Starting in the mid-20th century, the Islamic resurgence denotes a global movement of renewed interest in Islam as a relevant identity and model for community, manifested in greater religious piety and Muslim solidarity, in a growing adoption of Muslim culture, dress codes, terminology and values by Muslim worldwide (Lapidus 2002:823).

Then, international Muslim charities became part of an Islamic aid culture, parallel to and largely detached from the mainstream Western aid culture (Petersen 2014). The Islamic aid culture was shaped by organizations such as the Muslim World League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the International Council for Da’Wa and Relief. It had been shaped by experiences of marginalization, of being colonized, and of the poor not as distant sufferers but as fellow members of the religious community (Petersen 2014). Against this background the mainstream aid culture emphasizes values of universalism and neutrality, building on a material conception of poverty and assuming a strictly secularized conception of religion. The Islamic aid culture, on the other hand, came to promote a different set of values. First of all, the Islamic aid culture turned on notions of brotherhoods and Islamic solidarity, binding Muslims together in a global community, the umma. In this perspective all Muslims are part of the same religious brotherhood, and as such, closely connected, mutually interdependent, and obliged to help one
another. Section below is an attempt to carry out a preliminary description of the societal context where international Muslim charities operate.

*A distinct model: the Islamic idea of civil society*

The notion of civil society in the Arab world is quite controversial even among Arab intellectuals. The relationship between Islam and civil society has been the subject of an extensive academic debate, with some scholars arguing that Islam and civil society remain fundamentally incompatible. Arab scholars educated in Western countries in particular are vocal in criticizing Islamist movements for having a populist totalitarian discourse that contradicts true liberal democracy (Bishara 1995). This argument consciously accommodates cultural-essentialist assumptions about the incapacity of local, indigenous or religious traditions to enter the civic arena. Moreover, they translate the concept of civil society as *al-mujtama ‘al-madani*. *Madani*, meaning civil, civic, civilian and urban is in contrast with another notion, *al-ahli*, which can also mean civic but further suggests local, private, community, parochial and primordial.

Social and religious conservatives tend to prefer the translation *al-mujtama ‘al-ahli*, defined as the modern sector where a moral economy guarantees social, economic and political security (Carapico, 1998: 7; Ghalioun 2000). Indeed, context where Islamic donors operate is that of *al-mujtama ‘al-ahli*, mainly characterized by institutions used to integrate individuals, families and social groups in their networks, namely faith-based kinship associations, working as local charities (Challand, 2014). Arab academic thinkers who follow this line of thought are often sympathetic to the moderate Islamist movements with their voluntary associations and institutions (Harmsen 2008). Indeed, they regard a revival of the *mujtama‘ ahli* in modern form as the only possible means to overcome the crisis of politics in the Arab world. In regard to traditional forms of association, like tribal and familial groups, they would like to preserve their positive elements (mutual support and security for the individual), while rejecting the negative elements of factionalism and nepotism.

Recently, Islamic charitable associations have received increasing attention (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Clark 2004; Wiktorowicz 2004; Schaeublin 2009; Bonnefoy, 2012). Particularly after 9/11 many commentators suggested that Islamic charities served direct political goals by recruiting new radical militants and/or directly funding transnational jihadi groups. However, current academic research draws much more complex pictures, showing that Islamic charities have, by and large, catered and promoted horizontal networks within social classes (Clark, 2004; Bayat 1997; Harmsen, 2008). An Islamic bloc is indeed emerging, but more than an occulted project of Islamization, it is rather a process of activation of the material and moral resources of a conservative middle class summarily excluded until the 2011 revolution (Soli and Merone, 2013).
These studies indeed show persuasively an educated urban-based middle class benefited from a form of activism grounded in moral terms, while at the same time preserving political arrangements with the state (Clark, 2004: 156).

This renewed social context is particularly evident in Tunisia where the three most important new Islamic associations stemmed by the revolution, Tunisia Charity, Marhama and Attaawn, together initiated a process of civil society building, having close links with external founders (Soli and Merone, 2013). Indeed, Daymi (Tunisia Charity), Mohsen Jandoubi (Marhama) and Mohamed Nejib Karoui (Attaawun) are three influential social entrepreneurs who have activated a powerful network linking the external world to the internal natural process of emergence of a new social activism. The most relevant Gulf donor involved in this process is Qatar Charity, but there are also some powerful Kuwaiti organizations such as the Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri charitable society and the International Islamic Charity Organization, considered by Forbes business magazine as the most transparent in a list of large Islamic organizations.14

Islamic donors then are mostly engaged with local charities, which in turn act as mobilizing agents (Norris, 2003). Indeed, local charities are the pivotal actors triggering dynamics of social activism. How are Islamic charities different than other civil society actors? And in particular in what they diverge from professionalized NGOs mostly funded by Western donors? First, Islamic charities are more successful in raising funds and donation locally in significant proportions. Local financial rooting of Islamic charities implies a high degree of proximity with the population, a sense of incorporation of local constituencies into the work and priority of the charities. Moreover, thanks to their capillary penetration Muslim charitable organizations play a role in providing services to peripheral zones and to underserviced populations (Challand, 2014). Furthermore charities tend to put very little or no discourse about civil society, democracy or other key concepts usually mouthed by Western donors (Challand, 2008). Rather, interviewees insist on associations’ capacity to organize themselves, working directly with the people (Challand 2008 :239).

On the basis of these considerations, irrespective of normative views about Islamism and teleological views on civil society dynamics, Islamic activism might represent an important aspect of the vibrancy of civil society (Cavatorta, 2011). Clark argues that “Islamic social institutions”, namely Islamic associations of civil society are competitors of the state, representing a moderate

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response to the secular institutions inability to provide social welfare services (Clark, 2004:12). Moreover she underlines that the way in which Islamic charities are run responds more to demands of efficiency than to political or ideological requisites. In fact what makes such institutions Islamic is simply the belief of many individuals involved that they ‘are promoting Islam through their work’ (Clark, 2004:153). This means that Islamic institutions do indeed operate and socialize their members in much of the same way as it happens elsewhere and that they should be treated as rationalistic actors (Cavatorta 2011). Finally, Islamic donors, through their network of charities supporting welfare work are likely to privilege the idea of civil society mentioned above, thus indirectly supporting civic activism.

VI West vs. Islam?

This very last short section wants to be a little provocation to the paradigm of “clash of civilization”, which seems to emerge when opposing Western to Islamic donors. Indeed, from a preliminary research we notice that beyond the EU policies there are other approaches within member states. As an emblematic example, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) is managing an Open Regional Fund, which supports projects in Arab countries. Indeed, the regional program ‘Cooperation with Arab donors in the MENA region’, running from 2009 to 2015 aims to strengthen the mutual relations between Gulf based Arab donors and the German development aid. Each of these projects is being financed in close cooperation and coordination with at least one Islamic donor. While the main focus is the promotion of Arab civil society organizations, main targeted groups however, are the poor, marginalized and disempowered social groups in the Arab world. The participating organizations are actively involved in the planning and implementation of the projects, resulting in trustful relationships among all. One of the important partners of the GIZ in the AGFUND. One emblematic example of Arab- German cooperation within the Open Regional Fund is the AGFUND and CAWTAR (Center for Arab Women Training and Research) project in Tunisia which aims to improve health care and legal services for women.

VII Conclusion

The main goal of this working paper was to shed the light on the challenges of the EU’s projection of ideas towards the Mediterranean, with a specific focus on the policy of civil society assistance.

15 Source: https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/14363.html
Arab uprisings represented an extraordinary opportunity for the EU to reframe its approach in the region. However, the persistence of the same old paradigm based on a narrow conceptualization of civil society is likely to deteriorate the attractiveness of EU as a Normative Power. Then, Islamic donors were presented in this paper as an alternative model to the EU. Indeed, the strength of their social work and ideological discourse, compared to the rhetoric of EU democracy promotion, is likely to have a ‘universal’ appeal towards Arab civil society and it is capable of attracting different social categories to its message of social change. Under this perspective Islamic donors might be interpreted as raising “normative powers” challenging the spheres of influences established in the region so far. In particular, their main source of success is the network of Muslim charities surrounding their diffusion mechanisms. Indeed, according to preliminary findings we observe that whereas the EU’s policy of civil society assistance paradoxically cause a fragmentation of civil society, Islamic donors tend to support civil society actors by a bottom-up approach which tend to empower local networks. As a matter of fact, recipient countries facing severe conditions for receiving finance or even neglected by EU programmes addressing civil society are likely to turn to Islamic donors to get the same finance without having to implement any conditions. Conceptions of civil society that different donors build into their assistance programmes are finally linked to the reasons why international donors fund civil societies. Beside support to civil society we might speculate on many issues. Is the EU’s democracy promotion still characterized by a security bias? Are Islamic donors policies really intended to empower Arab societies and create a good social capital or they rather have the hidden aim to co-opt them under a system of patronage? Indeed, the final outcome of civil society assistance does not necessarily lead to a democratization process, and intended and unintended consequences are unpredictable. Moreover, it is also interesting to discover possible inconsistencies within these two worlds framed by two different types of donors in order to avoid the bias “Western vs. Islam”. The example of the collaboration between GIZ and AGFUND is emblematic in this sense. Indeed, beside the fixed approach of the EU there are other types of donors adopting a different paradigm. Following this ratio it will be interesting to take into consideration different typologies donors, so to see if there is a variation in the conception of aid, then on funding mechanisms, targets and in ultimate analysis on the impact on civil society. Finally the EU could either learn how to improve the ability to build partnerships with recipient countries. Notwithstanding the above, it will be worth revisiting these conclusions at a later stage of the research. Indeed, this fascinating topic, still underdeveloped, tremendously deserves to be further explored.

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